

“Clear, Build, Hold, Transfer”: Can Obama’s Afghan Strategy Work?

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Abstract: After years of policy neglect under the Bush administration, President Barack Obama came into office with a firm resolve to achieve U.S. interests, variously defined, in Afghanistan. Most recently, Obama declared that by August 2011, the United States will begin making a conditions-based transfer of responsibility to Afghans under the mantra of “clear, hold, build, and transfer.” In this article, the author evaluates the viability of this strategy. This article ultimately argues that this approach will prove inefficacious and calls for an immediate reconsideration of U.S. national security interests and appropriate contingency planning. Such an exercise will likely direct policy attention away from Afghanistan and toward Pakistan, where more U.S. security interests intersect than in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, civil-military relations, population-centric counter-insurgency, Taliban

When President Barack Obama assumed the U.S. presidency in January 2009, he inherited an Afghan policy in disarray. After eight years of engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Bush administration never convened an interagency assessment to develop a regional strategy for pacifying Afghanistan. In 2008, the U.S. Government Accounting Office decried this appalling lack of strategy toward Afghanistan as well as Pakistan in light of severe degradation of security conditions in both countries.¹ Finally, at the end of the summer of 2008, and

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after considerable criticism, the Bush administration conducted a net assessment of the Pakistan and Afghanistan theatres. Other agency-specific reviews followed suit.² President Barack Obama expeditiously asked Bruce Riedel (a former Central Intelligence Agency officer) to conduct a review of these reviews and develop a policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. The emergent white paper was released in March 2009 and called for an extensive state-building exercise aimed to buttress the state capacity of the Afghan government at all levels.³

As the insurgency continued to gain momentum and after President Hamid Karzai's August 2009 reelection (amidst proven electoral malfeasance), Republicans demanded troop increases to Afghanistan. Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) General Stanley McChrystal's public calls for more troops buttressed—if not outright instigated—the swelling political pressure for increased troop deployments. McChrystal's subversion of the civilian chain of command was viewed with distaste and anger in the White House.⁴ In response, Obama undertook another thorough—and much-criticized—interagency review of the conduct of the war, with the aim of developing a series of options, including a troop increase.⁵ After several months of deliberation, on December 1, 2009, Obama announced a revised “Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” at West Point.⁶ In that speech, Obama reaffirmed the core goal of disrupting, dismantling, and eventually defeating al-Qaeda and preventing the organization's return to either Afghanistan or Pakistan. He explained that success will both require denying al-Qaeda safe havens in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and reversing gains made by the Taliban since 2002. However, it dramatically scaled back the state-building agenda. He also announced the deployment of an additional 30,000 U.S. troops.⁷

To achieve these more modest goals, Obama articulated a three-pronged strategy. First, Washington will “pursue a military strategy that will break the Taliban's momentum and increase Afghanistan's capacity over the next 18 months.”⁸ The additional soldiers would secure key population centers as a part of a new population-centered counterinsurgency (COIN) approach advanced by McChrystal to provide improved capacity to train competent Afghan security forces to permit a conditions-based, phased transfer of responsibility to the Afghans beginning in 2011.⁹ Second, Obama emphasized that the United States needs to work with its partners, the United Nations, and the Afghan people “to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security.”¹⁰ In the wake of Karzai's fraudulent election and increasing criticism at home and abroad about his corrupt government, Obama was clear that “the days of providing a blank check are over. . . . We expect those who are ineffective or corrupt to be held accountable.”¹¹ Third, Obama announced that “we will act with the full recognition that our success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan.”¹² (Unfortunately, the administration has yet to articulate a genuine strategy toward Pakistan to secure greater cooperation. However, an evaluation of this issue is beyond the scope of this article.¹³)

The Obama administration has identified what it believes is an achievable end state: a gradual, condition-based transfer of responsibility to Afghans beginning in 2011, enabling the United States to begin downsizing the military effort and establishing a more normal diplomatic presence there that focuses on development, security assistance, and other forms of governance support. Under Obama, the COIN mantra of “clear, hold, and build” has become “clear, hold, build, and transfer.”

In this article, I assess the prospects for this strategy to begin fructifying by 2011 as planned and publicly stated. Although much ink has been spilled on the efficacy of U.S. COIN approaches in Afghanistan before the announcement of “clear, hold, build, transfer,” this new approach has received little scholarly attention. Admittedly, at the time of writing in spring 2010, this strategy is relatively new, and thus these arguments are necessarily preliminary and subject to reexamination if and when contravening data emerge. This current analysis is further complicated by a July 2010 change in NATO command. Following extreme insubordination by ISAF Commander McChrystal, General David H. Petraeus assumed McChrystal’s command and approach to “clear, hold, build, and transfer.” This article, written before this change of command, assumes a general continuity of command. This assumption is justified in considerable measure because Petraeus himself has emphasized the continuity of the COIN strategy in Afghanistan.¹⁴ However, this argument presents serious structural and well-known problems that have plagued the COIN effort thus far.

Reversing the Taliban Momentum and Clearing Out the Insurgents?

There are essentially two fundamental elements of McChrystal’s military strategy in Afghanistan promulgated in the spring of 2009. The first is more robust commitment to pursuing a genuinely population-centric COIN approach, which prioritizes protecting the population rather than killing the adversary. After many years in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. army finally developed and disseminated its first-ever Field Manual on COIN (U.S. Army Field Manual 3–24 (FM 3–24)/ Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–33.5) in 2007.¹⁵ Despite the population-centered doctrine articulated in FM 3–24, the COIN operations in Afghanistan have not been population-centric. The Marjah offensive, which was commenced in February 2010 in central Helmand, is purportedly the first test of McChrystal’s renewed commitment to population-centric COIN.¹⁶ At the time of writing, it is too early to assess the success or failures of this approach.

The second element involves the employment of some of the additional troops to escalate the production of Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) personnel and, ideally, the quality of those personnel. The need for rapidly expanded numbers of ANSF is due in part to the relatively inadequate numbers of international troops,

as specified in FM 3–24. As of March 2010, there are some 86,000 international troops in Afghanistan, with 45,100 in Regional Command South and 24,900 in Regional Command East.¹⁷ (In addition, there are 6,300 in Regional Command Capital, 5,895 in Regional Command North, and 4,600 in Regional Command West.) These numbers are clearly far below the prescribed force levels per the guidance of FM 3–24 for either the entire country (460,000–575,000 troops) or simply for regional commands south and east (188,000–235,000 troops). In reality, the numbers overestimate international forces' combat capability because of the "national caveats" that many European countries have emplaced that seriously restrict their forces from engaging in offensive operations.¹⁸ The inadequacies of the international military presence necessitates the induction of ANSF to clear areas of insurgents and hold areas once cleared, which is needed to create the conditions for "building" social, economic, and political structures in the area. And the availability of robust ANSF is needed for the ultimate goal of transferring security responsibility to Afghans. The subject of inadequate ANSF—in terms of quality and quantity—has been well characterized elsewhere and are not further elaborated in this article.¹⁹

Arguably, with the disposition of international troops and the current state of the ANSF, the current strategy is not to conduct COIN, as tactically dictated by FM 3–24, if for no other reason than that doing so is simply impossible with the available resources. With the additional 30,000 U.S. troops and a small, as-of-yet undetermined increment of international troops, the new "population-centric" COIN strategy will focus on protecting ten population centers that would stop short of an all-out assault on the Taliban while establishing conditions for longer-term security, such as Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kunduz, Herat, Jalalabad, and a few cluster of villages. In addition, military planners seek to retake important agricultural areas that have been controlled by the Taliban, such as the Helmand River valley (the objective of Operation Moshtarak in Marjah), as well as to (re)secure key lines of control such as the Ring Road. At the same time, military forces aim to maintain pressure on the insurgents in more remote areas by relying on surveillance drones and Special Operations Forces who may be able to identify pockets of Taliban and guide aerial attacks.²⁰ Since taking charge as Commander ISAF, McChrystal had issued orders to use excessive care in minimizing civilian casualties as a part of his approach, emphasizing protecting populations over killing enemies.²¹

As of August 2010, this full complement of additional troops has not yet been inducted into the theater, in contrast to the Iraq "surge," which was executed within a few months. The reason for the prolonged induction of forces is the inadequate military infrastructure that exists in Afghanistan to accommodate the increase. In contrast, Iraq had numerous bases and airfields constructed by the Saddam Hussein regime, which could support the rapid influx of troops. Thus, new facilities (bases, billeting, etc.) need to be constructed. Moreover, complex logistical issues need to

be resolved to support the expansion as much of the troop increase in Afghanistan requires moving equipment from Iraq to Afghanistan, which is no easy feat. The relatively slow induction of additional troops necessarily is a constraint on how fast the United States can reverse Taliban gains.

There are numerous serious constraints to this effort to reverse Taliban gains. “Clearing” areas of insurgents is inherently a fraught—if not outright impossible—exercise irrespective of the numbers of international and available Afghan security forces. U.S. military personnel interviewed by the author note that clearing an area is nearly impossible, both because the Taliban blend in with society and cannot easily be discerned and because many of the Taliban fled to areas not occupied by security forces. For better or worse, weeks before commencing Operation Moshtarak, coalition forces announced the looming offensive to ensure that civilians would leave, with the hope of limiting civilian casualties. While some insurgents chose to stay and fight, many simply “squirted out” and became someone else’s problem. Given that insurgents are indistinguishable from noncombatants, eliminating them requires intelligence and cooperation from locals who often distrust the coalition forces and ANSF or fear retribution from the Taliban. For these reasons, Operation Moshtarak has thus far failed to “clear” the area of insurgents, despite several months of fighting.

Holding: Can the Afghan National Security Forces Rise to the Task?

The second serious impediment to the strategy is the elusive goal of “holding,” which has heretofore been very difficult in Afghanistan. The recent evacuation of troops from the Korengal Valley in Kunar province—a well-known stronghold of al-Qaeda—attests to the difficulty of “holding” terrain.²² The international military presence has tended to argue that the failure to hold is due to a fundamental dearth of troops on the ground. As is well-known, ISAF has sought to build up the ANSF, which is comprised of the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Air Corps, and the various elements of the Afghan National Police (ANP) forces (e.g., the uniformed police, border police, civil order police). As is also well-known, this effort has been consistently undermined by inadequate trainers, ad-hoc training approaches, and discordant bilateral donations of nonstandard equipment.²³

Throughout much of the summer and winter of 2009, U.S. military planners aimed to expand the ANSF to an end-strength of 400,000. Currently, the Afghan National Army (ANA) has a purported strength of 100,130 personnel and the Afghan National Police (ANP) somewhere near 80,000.²⁴ Those numbers likely significantly over-represent the actual strength of either force. International officials I interviewed in August 2009 concur that perhaps as many as 25,000 of the police are “ghost police,” persons who are being paid for policing duties but who may not actually exist. Both the ANA and ANP personnel are prone to taking a

variety of unauthorized leave, and corruption affects the entire gamut of recruiting, retaining, compensating, and training these two forces.²⁵

This is not to say that there have not been successes since 2002. The ANA is one of the most respected institutions in Afghanistan and is developing adequate operational capabilities and effectiveness. This does not mean that the ANA is free of corruption or as successful as is generally believed.²⁶ Absent without leave (AWOL) figures have declined. In May 2009, the AWOL rate was 9.1 percent, which is still high, but represents an enormous improvement over previous years, when it was as high as 40 percent.²⁷ Department of Defense (DoD) officials report that December 2009 was a boon month for ANA recruiting due to increased pay, shorter enlistment contracts, hazard pay, and other inducements. Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell, head of the Afghan training mission, reported that in the first seven days of December more than 2,695 recruits signed up, compared with 831 in September.²⁸

However, enormous challenges remain. Some 90 percent of ANA recruits are illiterate, compared with the national illiteracy rate of 75 percent. This means that illiterate and nonnumerate ANA personnel are, at best, challenged by logistics (e.g., maintenance and supply of weapons, munitions, and spare parts), cannot read maps (much less use geopositioning systems), cannot read manuals for new—much less for complex—weapons (e.g., newly introduced U.S. M-4 rifles to replace AK-47s), or even record license plates. Analysts often underestimate the impact of illiteracy and lack of numeracy among “trigger pullers.” In fact, the fundamental dearth of human capital in Afghanistan generally and the ANSF in particular is proving to be an enormous challenge. These problems are compounded further for the ANP, who are expected to file incident reports, track license plates, compile evidence, and perform other tasks that require police personnel to read and write and perform basic math.²⁹

Moreover, there are simple and elementary problems with numbers. With respect to building the ANA, reenlistments remain a challenge, as does attrition due to death, disability, and desertions. The turnover rate within the ANA is 25 percent; however, DoD derivation of this figure is confusing and inconsistent over time.³⁰ Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason report that when one does the simple calculations of recruits in and recruits out, at steady state, the ANA will be hard-pressed to sustain a force of 100,000.³¹

Irrespective of the actual numbers of recruits that come into the ANA and the ANP, and the ever-more aggressive production goals and expedited timelines, training these recruits is rate limited by several persistent impediments. ISAF and U.S. officials concede that there is a paucity of trainers for both the ANA and ANP. The fill-rate for ANP mentors may be as low as one in three.³² Trainers for the ANA are more adequate, reflecting the consistently higher priority that building the ANA has enjoyed relative to the ANP. Whereas 3,314 persons are needed for the ANA embedded training teams, the United States has fielded 1,655, and

NATO countries have contributed 799. This permits 52 operational mentoring and liaisons teams. However, there remains a shortage of 849 persons, for a fill-rate of 75 percent. DoD officials have conceded that the paucity of trainers has resulted in trainee-to-trainer ratios that are too large to be effective. And not only is the quantity of trainers a problem, so is the quality, especially for the ANP, which has been largely mentored by DynCorp contractors whose performance has been suboptimal.³³

With respect to the ANP, the various international actors involved have used varying and inconsistent since 2002. Indeed there is disagreement among these actors about what kind of police force is needed by Afghanistan and over what time horizon. For example, the United States has advocated a police training program that will result in a paramilitary institution. Advocates of the approach contend that Afghan police are needed for COIN operations now. Moreover, they argue with considerable justification that the police are most exposed and vulnerable to antigovernment forces (AGF) while, at the same time, they are less well-trained and equipped to contend with these threats than is the Afghan army.

Police training has consistently received less attention and fewer resources than the ANA. Germany was the lead nation after the Bonn Conference on International Development Policy in 2002. The Germans focused on training relatively small numbers of officers at the rehabilitated police academy while doing very little to train the rank and file.³⁴ The U.S. State Department stepped in with various ad hoc attempts to retrain the existing police rank and file. The goals were modest and aimed to provide elementary policing skills, such as crowd control during election-related activities. The United States employed the U.S. private security firm, DynCorp, to perform the training. The training went forward with little institutional resistance in most places, with the exception of Herat province, which was under the sway of Ismail Khan (the preeminent “warlord” of the area), who refused to cooperate.

The “quick-fix” approach yielded very few fixes and was not necessarily quick. While other troop-contributing countries have been uncomfortable with the U.S. approach, they were unable to develop and resource alternative plans. In the absence of a widely accepted scalable police-training program, various countries engaged in bilateral training of ANP with different doctrines and approaches. They also supplied various equipment platforms that were obsolete at worst or, at best, contributed to a multitude of systems that rendered logistics (e.g., maintenance and resupply) a heroic task. As such, these ad hoc approaches produced ANP cadres of varying—albeit consistently low—quality and competence with respect to training and equipping.³⁵

The current approach to building and training the ANP is the U.S.-led Focused District Development (FDD). This program was initiated in late 2007. This initiative enjoys some degree of support among the other international actors in Afghanistan if for no other reason than others have been unable to offer alternatives

to FDD. FDD was conceptualized to contend with police corruption at the district level. Once a district has been selected (based on military priorities), all ANP are pulled out for eight weeks of training. (Clearly, this is inadequate to deal with corruption, ineptitude, illiteracy, etc.) They are replaced by the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), a national police force that ostensibly is not tied to corrupt local officials, criminal syndicates, or AGFs. U.S. military interviewed by the author claim that district residents are so pleased with the ANCOP that they do not actually want their own police to return.³⁶ In theory, once trained, the ANP are supposed to be mentored for at least two months. In principle, this does not happen. Moreover, FDD does not impart policing skills, rather paramilitary training reflecting current—not future—operational requirements.³⁷

Unfortunately, FDD does not require the Afghan government to deal with the corruption in the first instance by removing corrupt officials (including district governors among others). Recidivism is high. Given the paucity of police mentors, FDD is moving slowly. As of the fall of 2009, police in only 55 districts of eight provinces have been trained (Afghanistan has 34 provinces and nearly 400 districts).³⁸ According to officials at the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (the lead training entity that has since been merged with the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan), the program *could* train all districts by 2014, conditional on receiving the resources it needs. This is, of course, unlikely to happen given the meager international commitment to this effort. Moreover, given the past success of FDD; recidivism; failure to deal with corruption at the political level (which is the underlying problem with the police); and near exclusive focus on paramilitary training at the expense of police training; the resultant police force is unlikely to be appropriate for the future domestic security needs of Afghanistan.

Even if by some slim chance adequate trainers become available for ANA and ANP training (made possible by the new surge), if the problems with FDD are addressed, and if recruitment, retention, and attrition are improved, the Afghan government is and will remain unable to pay even the recurring costs of its current ANSF structure. Karzai anticipates that the West will have to pay for the ANSF's recurring annual costs of some \$10 billion for at least two decades.³⁹ As international troops withdraw, it remains to be seen whether or not partner parliaments—much less the U.S.—congress will be willing to continue paying these bills.

To contend with these sustained systemic problems in producing adequate numbers and quality of ANSF, the United States has promoted a series of militia programs palatably titled “Community Defense Initiatives.” While DoD officials are loathe the use of the word “militias” to describe these and have introduced neologisms in both Dari and Pashto for the awkward phrase, Afghans do use the transliteration of the word “militia” and are dismissive of the rebranding efforts. DoD officials, in explaining their vision, explain that these community defense forces (or militias in Afghan parlance) are supposed to be extensions of the ANP

controlled by the government of Afghanistan, and they will disband when the ANP forces become competent. The same DoD officials contend that they will provide training—but not weapons—to those communities that have formed “militias” to counter the Taliban.

The DoD justifies this approach on multiple grounds. First, the DoD maintains that there is an urgent need to secure the population in the face of inadequate national or international security forces. Second, they argue (with little actual understanding of Afghan institutions) that tribes and other local institutions are legitimate providers of order and justice. Finally, the DoD claims that the Taliban have co-opted tribes, subtribes, and clans, and thus the coalition forces have missed this important opportunity to compete with the Taliban.⁴⁰

Although it is tempting to dismiss this as a U.S. plan, some Afghan stakeholders likely support this because they stand to benefit from the scheme, which will essentially formalize the various commanders’ militias. (Recall that one of the most important efforts from 2002 onward was cleansing the Ministry of Interior from such commanders and their militias.) Indeed, former interior minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar emphasized the need for such “community defense councils” at a May 2010 meeting at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC.⁴¹

Since “holding” cleared areas requires the presence of a capable ANSF, and because this is critical to the desired end state of “transfer,” these limitations in training the ANSF either suggest that this goal of transferring security responsibility to the Afghans will not be met in many districts by 2011 without a serious relaxing of standards to justify this “transfer.”

Building: Can the Afghan Government Deliver Governance?

While the addition of more troops has received considerable publicity, an important and innovative complement to the Obama strategy is the so-called “civilian surge.”⁴² Obama understood the need for a surge in civilian capacity even as a presidential candidate. In July 2008, he said, “We cannot continue to rely only on our military in order to achieve the national security objectives that we’ve set. We’ve got to have a civilian national security force that’s just as powerful, just as strong, just as well funded.”⁴³

Obama retained Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense. Like Obama, Gates believes “One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win.” Rather, victory requires “economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation good governance, providing basic services to the people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more—these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success. . . . The Department of Defense has taken on many of these burdens that might

have been assumed by civilian agencies in the past . . . But it is no replacement for the real thing—civilian involvement and expertise.”⁴⁴

The military is looking forward to civilians taking a greater role if not the lead in state-building in Afghanistan. The military has long opined that the United States needs an expanded civilian capability for such efforts, noting that, in the absence of such a civilian capability, the military has had to take on these tasks. There is a numerical reality that makes the U.S. military the public face of U.S. diplomacy: The American Foreign Service Association in an October 2007 bulletin explained that “the military has more band members than the State Department has diplomats.”⁴⁵

In recognition that civilians are needed to help the Afghan government improve government at the federal and local levels, Richard Holbrooke explained in November 2009 that by the early weeks of 2010, he expected some 974 civilians to be deployed to Afghanistan. If executed, this would be an unprecedented civilian effort in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ This civilian capability is an essential element of McChrystal’s Commander’s Assessment, as further adumbrated in the *U.S. Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*. This plan, drawing from guidance from both the U.S. embassy in Kabul and the commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, purported to be a collaborative U.S. interagency product drafted in close consultation with ISAF, UNAMA, and other partner nations.⁴⁷

That document laid out a series of guiding principles that included the importance of assisting the Afghan government to assume a more effective leadership role; increasingly directing resources to the subnational level, “where the insurgency draws strength through coercion and exploiting people’s dissatisfaction with their government”⁴⁸; unity of effort across all civilian and military components; close collaboration with international partners; visible and measurable success; and promotion of accountability and transparency within the U.S. government as well as within the Afghan government and other partners in disbursing assistance.⁴⁹ Reflective of U.S. security interests, the plan identified the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the heart of the insurgency, as primary focus of interests, with the eastern area (e.g., Nuristan, Kunar, Nangahar) as a second priority area. The plan argues that “Securing the most unstable provinces will have a cascading impact on the rest of the country.”⁵⁰ The document also lays out “eleven key Counter-Insurgency transformative effects.”⁵¹ U.S. effort will be focused at three levels on achieving these effects: community, provincial, and national. At each level, civilian-military teams will assess and prioritize the so-called transformative effects.⁵² This is the first serious move away from the long-standing model of U.S. engagement of the Afghanistan government in Kabul toward serious focus on subnational forms of governance.

To achieve these objectives, a greater number of civilians would have to be deployed to Afghanistan to engage military counterparts. When Obama took over

the White House in January 2009, there were only 320 civilians deployed by the United States in Afghanistan, of whom only 67 served outside of Kabul. In contrast, 388 persons from the “civilian surge” will be deployed in the provinces.

No doubt, this is an important shift in U.S. strategy and resources, and it may result in enhanced governance. However, without a commitment from the Afghan government at all national levels to govern and without a serious commitment on behalf of the international community to impart skills and “work themselves out of a job,” will the Afghan government be capable of delivering services at all levels of government? What plans are in place to diminish Afghan dependence on international programming and resources? Equally important, given the problems with U.S. Agency for International Development and its well-known and widely criticized model of employing layers of contracting with little or no accountability, what guarantee is there that this expanded civilian effort will have salutary—much less enduring—effects on Afghan governance capacity?

Reintegration without Reconciliation?

Perhaps the most controversial and least empirically defensible element of the U.S. strategy to transfer responsibility to Afghans is the “reintegration” effort, which comes out of the position of U.S. civilian and military leadership that the United States cannot “kill” its way out of Afghanistan. U.S. officials are clear that this “reintegration” effort is *not* tantamount to “reconciliation” and focuses on providing financial incentives (e.g., job training and education) to low- and mid-ranking Taliban commanders and foot soldiers.⁵³ The State Department’s January 2010 regional strategy document explains that that effort will “reach out to communities, individuals and groups, coordinate protection, amnesty, and support (such as employment) to those who reintegrate and disarm, and support monitoring and re-radicalization mechanisms.”⁵⁴ This is in contrast to the Karzai government’s proposed plan for reconciliation, which some Afghans fear means cutting a deal with the Taliban.⁵⁵

There are some immediate concerns surrounding this initiative. First is the assumption that undergirds this program—that those fighting for and with the Taliban do so for nonideological reasons. Richard Holbrooke, United States Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan defended the rationale for “reintegration” by arguing that “. . . the people out there we are talking about [Taliban foot soldiers and some low- and mid-level commanders] are not the ideological leaders. And isn’t it a lot better to invite them off the battlefield through a program of jobs, land, integration than it is to have to try to kill every one of them?”⁵⁶ On another occasion he claimed that “the overwhelming majority of these people are not ideological supporters of Mullah Omar (the fugitive Taliban leader) and al-Qaida. . . . Based on interviews with prisoners, returnees, experts, there must be at least 70 percent of these people who are not fighting for anything to do with those causes.”⁵⁷

It is far from obvious that such interlocutors would be amenable to conceding ideological motivations over more quotidian and less noxious motives such as paucity of economic opportunities. At the most basic level, the assumption that most fight for pecuniary reasons rather than ideological reasons (be they Islamist commitments or opposition to occupation by foreign forces) may be ill-founded. In addition, given the social capital that fighters have accumulated, successful efforts of convincing some Taliban to “reintegrate” (or more appropriately “integrate”) may require a face-saving mechanism to give up the fight with honor and providing comprehensive substitutes for the various social amenities fighters enjoy (e.g., status, security, honor, access to lucrative legal and illegal income streams). Financial allurements and suspect promises of training and jobs may be inadequate.⁵⁸ At best it will be a testable hypothesis.

A second problem is the U.S. claim that its reintegration efforts depend on political leadership in Kabul, which prefers a policy of “reconciliation” rather than “reintegration.” The former implies a political process and negotiation. Washington has clashed with Kabul and other partners over this issue. For example, the United States rejected Karzai’s proposal (first made in November 2009) to invite Taliban leadership—including Mullah Omar—to a national “Loya Jirga” or “Grand Council” meeting aimed at achieving a peace agreement.⁵⁹ In late January 2010, Kai Eide, the outgoing United Nations special representative, called on Afghan officials to seek the removal of at least some senior Taliban leaders from the United Nations’ list of terrorists, as a first step toward opening direct negotiations with the insurgent group.⁶⁰ Holbrooke evidenced some willingness to do so with low-ranking members. He was unwilling to entertain easing up on the leaders of the insurgency (e.g., Omar, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) and claimed that, in any event, he “can’t imagine what would justify such an action at this time . . . and I don’t know anyone who is suggesting that.”⁶¹

Eide, for his part, expressed concern that while reintegration may be useful, it may be inadequate, saying “I don’t believe it’s as simple as saying that these are people who are unemployed, and if we find them employment they will go our way. . . . Reintegration by itself is not enough.”⁶² He also expressed concern that “while some rank-and-file Taliban may fight for economic reasons, he said, “the motives of most were more complex. The Taliban’s leaders exert more control over the foot soldiers than they are given credit for.”⁶³

The discord over “reintegration” versus “reconciliation” between Washington and Kabul likely reflects greater strategic divergence between the two. The Americans understand “reintegration” as “insurgent defection,” which may follow successful clearing military operations or occur during the holding and building phases. U.S. military officials have told this author that the U.S. military surge is intended to reverse the momentum of the Taliban and to deliver decisive defeats to shift the cost-benefit calculus of foot soldiers and low- and mid-level

commanders, such that they would become amenable to reintegration without a political, negotiated process of reconciling with the government.⁶⁴

Third, it is not clear who in Afghanistan wants either reconciliation or reintegration. Many Afghans were appalled and dismayed when the United States recuperated and rehabilitated old Afghan warlords from the “civil war” period in late 2001 and early 2002. Afghan human rights groups (including women’s rights groups) fear that any political accommodation with the Taliban will translate into losses in hard-earned gains in respect for human rights. Afghans have reason to worry. In late 2009 or early 2010, Afghanistan suddenly implemented a controversial law, which gives immunity from prosecution to those Taliban who have killed and maimed, provided that they lay down their weapons.

The amnesty law had been shelved for nearly two years after it was passed by a slender parliamentary majority in 2007. (It is not clear exactly when and how the law came into force, as Kabul has remained obfuscatory about it.) The law came into force in advance of the January 2010 London conference on Afghanistan, wherein Karzai announced his plans for reconciliation, and the international community agreed to support reintegration efforts financially. It was also passed in advance of the much-awaited “peace jirga,” in which the government planned to reach out to the insurgents. Karzai’s government likely saw this law as a necessary if insufficient condition for the peace jirga to be successful in wooing the insurgents. After being postponed, the peace jirga was finally held in June 2010 amid concerns within important cross-sections of Afghanistan regarding the composition of the jirga, the possible end-state of the jirga and its impact for human rights advances made since 2011, as well as the outcome of the jirga itself.⁶⁵ The timing and goals of the government have motivated some Afghans’ apprehension that the law was brought into force to permit Karzai’s push for a “quick peace deal with insurgents.” The law also gives immunity from prosecution to all of the country’s warlords—the former factional leaders—many of whom are loathed by broad swathes of Afghans because of the atrocities they perpetrated during Afghanistan’s 1990s civil war.⁶⁶

Whether or not reconciliation and reintegration will bring about a conclusion to the insurgency and long-deferred stability in any policy-relevant future is dubious. Pakistan, as the main patron of the Taliban, believe the Taliban are Pakistan’s only means to contain the Indian influence in Afghanistan and protect Pakistan’s strategic interest in Afghanistan. Pakistan has kept its cards close to its chest. While Pakistan publicly frets that the international community will leave Afghanistan and bequeath to Pakistan evermore domestic instability, arguably Pakistan is the biggest beneficiary of such a departure as Afghanistan will again be vulnerable to Pakistani interference. The departure of international military forces will also ex post facto legitimize Pakistan’s long-standing policy of supporting the Taliban even while being remunerated for being a partner in the very war on terror it has undermined.⁶⁷

Conclusion: Implications for “Transfer”

While it is true that coalition forces—with or without ANSF assistance—have never lost a battle against the insurgents, it is unclear whether or not they have ever “cleared” the area except temporarily. Given the focused areas of operations due to troop paucity, at most they “clear” the insurgents largely by pushing them into other areas. Therefore, “holding” an area once “cleared” is critical to ensuring that the insurgents do not return to *that* locality. (This has been the case with Operation Moshtarak in Marjah, for example.) Clearly, the international and ANA troops cannot stay indefinitely in an area if they are to move to other locations as planned. This means that holding will have to become a function of local Afghan police. Given the quality and quantity of ANP, “holding” is likely as unlikely to fructify as “clearing.”

If clearing and holding are illusory objectives, what prospects exist for “building,” which ultimately requires the Afghan government to effectively operate at federal, provincial, district, and subdistrict levels? In principle, “building” can be assisted by the international community and, indeed, at long last, the international community has learned that this is likely a civilian—not military—function. However, the goal must be skill transfer to enable the Afghan government to provide this function at subnational (i.e., district and subdistrict) levels, where the insurgents prevail. Ministerial capacity building remains a challenge both because it has received far fewer human and other resources and also because the ministries themselves exhibit differing levels of commitment to being competent service providers rather than direct access to a variety of illegal activities.⁶⁸ Addressing the pervasive corruption is no doubt going to be a necessary element of any strategy to undermine Taliban credibility and, over time, to increase confidence in the government at all levels.⁶⁹

Pacification ultimately requires that some insurgents defect and become willing to reintegrate. Here too the strategy does not inspire confidence. Even *if* insurgents are fighting for pecuniary reasons, they have established social capital through fighting and have acquired a social network that confers prestige, safety, and access to licit and illicit activities among other group amenities. Some face-saving method is necessary to reintegrate these combatants, and these social goods need to be substituted by other structure.

There are more fundamental problems with the application of FM 3–24 to the Afghan theater. The manual largely derives lessons from *failed* past COIN efforts and has never been validated with certitude. The so-called successes in Iraq are highly contested, and the actual outcome of the doctrine’s employment will become clear only with the luxuries of hindsight and the passage of time. Equally problematic are the insurgencies from which FM 3–24’s prescriptions are derived. In those insurgencies there was a state (albeit a colonial one). The instigators were nationalist intellectuals whom the rural population viewed as outsiders. This

enabled COIN forces to separate insurgents from these populations. Application of FM 3–24’s “population-centric” approach is unlikely to succeed in Afghanistan because the insurgency shares none of these features and because it underestimates the degree of support that the Taliban enjoy in the Pashtun belt. These factors suggest that “clearing” an area of insurgents will be extremely difficult if not impossible.⁷⁰

Without meaningful progress in clearing, holding, and building, transfer of responsibility to Afghans and the concomitant ability to establish a normal U.S.-Afghan bilateral relationship by 2011 seems far removed. This suggests that 2011 is either not a realistic timeline that will be extended, or the conditions for transfer will be downgraded to accommodate the political demands for troop withdrawal, suggesting that long-term stability will continue to elude Afghans even after nine years of unprecedented international financial commitments and significant loss of international and Afghan lives.

This analysis of the enduring structural challenges to “clear, hold, build, and transfer” suggests that this more modest approach likely will not proffer stability in Afghanistan, even if some minimal conditions for transfer are established. Accepting these post-COIN realities demands serious contingency planning, which has yet to occur.

Such contingency planning should not be confused with the now-lapsed debates within parts of the U.S. government between the counterterrorism approach articulated by Vice President Joseph Biden, which focuses on al-Qaeda, and the more sweeping COIN approach, which focuses on the Taliban that has ultimately become policy. Three key questions, among potential others, should motivate such contingency planning: (1) What are key U.S. national security interests in the region; (2) is a defeat of the Taliban genuinely such an interest; and (3) where are the threats from al-Qaeda, and how can they be defeated if the Taliban are not?

Honest answers to these questions will likely point away from Afghanistan and toward Pakistan, where more security interests intersect than in Afghanistan. However, because U.S. troops are in Afghanistan, Pakistan remains a secondary support theater in which the United States has failed to articulate a coherent strategy to mitigate the threats from local, regional, and international terrorism, as well as nuclear proliferation. Unfortunately, Washington has simply failed to articulate a consensus set of answers to these fundamental questions. Until it does so and forges appropriate contingency plans, the United States and its allies will remain insecure from the myriad threats emanating from the region.

NOTES

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2. Pakistan Policy Working Group (PPWG), *The Next Chapter: The United States and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: PPWG, 2008).

3. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Civilian, Military Officials at Odds over Resources Needed for Afghan Counterinsurgency," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/07/AR2009100704088.html>. See also White House, "White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan," March 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf.

4. See Alex Spillius, "White House Angry at General Stanley McChrystal Speech on Afghanistan," *Telegraph*, October 5, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/6259582/White-House-angry-at-General-Stanley-McChrystal-speech-on-Afghanistan.html>.

5. Mark Thompson, "Is Obama's Delay on Troops Hurting U.S. Prospects in Afghanistan?" *Time*, November 4, 2009.

6. White House, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan," December 1, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

7. McChrystal asked for 40,000 additional troops; Obama called for U.S. allies to contribute the balance.

8. White House, "Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

9. *Ibid.* The media has misconstrued Obama's identification of the 2011 target for a "pull out." The transfer of Afghan security responsibility will take place in phases on a district-by-district level should they prove confident. Moreover, declaring a timeline may encourage combatants to hold on until the withdrawal commences. However, declaring a timeline also suggests to the Afghan government that it *must* step and become more effective as the international forces cannot sustain their presence indefinitely for fiscal and political reasons.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. This is treated at length in C. Christine Fair, Keith Crane, Christopher S. Chivvis, Samir Puri, and Michael Spirtas, *Pakistan: Securing a Insecure State* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, forthcoming).

14. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), "Gen. Petraeus Assumes Command of ISAF," July 4, 2010, <http://www.isaf.nata.int/article/news/gen.-petraeus-assumes-command-of-isaf.html>; and Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236>.

15. U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual (U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

16. See Dexter Filkins, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model," *New York Times*, February 12, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/world/asia/13kabul.html?hp>.

17. ISAF, "International Security Assistance (ISAF): Facts and Figures," February 1, 2010, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf>.

18. See discussion on national caveats in Vincent Morelli, Paul Belkin, *NATO in Afghanistan: A Test for Transatlantic Alliance* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/row/RL33627.pdf>. The field manual recommends anywhere between 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1,000 residents in an Area of Operations (AOR). With an estimated population of 23 million (2009 estimate), this would translate to a total of 460,000 to 575,000 counterinsurgent forces in Afghanistan. Needless to say, this is a force requirement that is far in excess of any possible international deployment. Arguably, the insurgency has not systematically affected the entire country. With the induction of the additional 30,000 troops, the U.S. COIN efforts will be focused on key provinces in the NATO/ISAF Regional Command South (estimated population of 3 million) and the most troubled provinces of Regional Command East (estimated population of 6.4 million). Focusing on these populations, FM 3-24 suggests a more modest total COIN force of 188,000 to 235,000. Provincial population estimates derived from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "Central Statistics Organization," <http://www.cso.gov.af/demography/population.html>. Estimated data for 2005.

19. See C. Christine Fair and Seth G. Jones, *Securing Afghanistan-Getting back on Track* (Washington, DC: USIP, 2009); CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*; Anthony

H. Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces: Shaping Host Country Forces as Part of Armed Nation Building* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2009); and Department of Defense, “Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan” (report to Congress in accordance with the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, June 2009), Section 1230, Public Law 110–181.

20. Thom Shanker, Peter Baker, and Helene Cooper, “U.S. to Protect Populous Afghan Areas, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/asia/28policy.html?pagewanted=print>.

21. In the February 2010 Operation Moshtarak in Marjah, McChrystal prohibited the use of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System after its use resulted in civilian casualties. See CBS News, “Civilian Deaths Mar Marjah Offensive,” February 14, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/14/world/main6208526.shtml>. Nonetheless, the operations executed by “progovernment forces” (PGFs, including international and Afghan security forces) have resulted in a growing number of civilian casualties since 2007, even though the PGFs are responsible for a declining portion of those casualties due to concerted mitigation efforts. This is an enormous improvement over the previous year. See United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2008* (Kabul: UNAMA, 2009), http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/UNAMA_09february-Annual%20Report_PoC%202008_FINAL_11Feb09.pdf.

22. See Julius Cavendish, “Afghanistan War: US Leaves Remote Outpost of Korengal,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0415/Afghanistan-war-US-leaves-remote-outpost-of-Korengal>.

23. Fair and Jones, *Securing Afghanistan-Getting back on Track*; CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*; Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces*; and Department of Defense, *Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*.

24. ISAF, “International Security Assistance (ISAF): Facts and Figures,” February 1, 2010, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf>; and Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC–A), “Fact Sheet Afghan National Police,” http://www.cstc-a.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=201&Itemid=148.

25. CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*; Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces*; and Department of Defense, *Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*.

26. International Crisis Group, “A Force in Fragments: Reconstructing the Afghan National Army,” *Asia Report*, May 12, 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan.aspx>.

27. Department of Defense, *Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*; and CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*.

28. Ann Flaherty, “US Commanders Report Surge in Afghan Army Recruits, Attribute to Promise of More Pay,” Associated Press, December 9, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=9291329>.

29. See “Illiteracy Slows Afghan Army U.S. Pullout,” CBS News World, September 14, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/09/14/world/main5309273.shtml>. For a discussion of illiteracy in the ANP, see RUSI/FPRI, “Reforming the Afghan National Police,” October 2009, <http://www.fpri.org/research/nationalsecurity/afghanpolice/ReformingAfghanNationalPolice.pdf>.

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32. Author conversations with CSTC-A and NATO in March 2009 and August 2009.

33. CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*.

34. Antonio Giustozzi, “Shadow Ownership and SSR in Afghanistan” in *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform*, ed. T. Donais (Zurich: Lit Verlag for the Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces [DCAF], 2008), 215–32.

35. See Fair and Jones, *Securing Afghanistan-Getting back on Track*; International Crisis Group, “Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy, Crisis Group Asia Briefing No. 85,” *Crisis*

Group, December 2008; International Crisis Group, "Reforming Afghanistan's Police: Asia Report No. 138," *Crisis Group*, August 2007; and Andrew Wilder, *Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007).

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37. Fair and Jones, *Securing Afghanistan-Getting back on Track*; CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*; Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces*; and Department of Defense, "Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan."

38. Fair and Jones, *Securing Afghanistan-Getting back on Track*; CIGI, *Security Sector Reform Monitor-Afghanistan No. 2*; and Cordesman, *Afghan National Security Forces*. The actual number of districts is not yet determined. This figure of 400 districts is taken from U.S. Agency for International Development/Office of Transition Initiatives, "Map of Afghanistan Provinces and Districts," September 2009, http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/crosscutting_programs/transition_initiatives/country/afghanistan2/afg_map_prov.pdf.

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47. U.S. Government, "U.S. Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," August 10, 2009, <http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/0908eikenberryandmchcrystal.pdf>.

48. *Ibid.*, Executive Summary.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. These effects included population security; elections and continuity of governance; expansion of accountable and transparent governance; taking the information initiative; access to justice; action against irreconcilables, creating sustainable jobs, and agricultural opportunity an market access; countering the nexus of criminality, corruption, narcotics, and insurgency; government and community-led reintegration; and border access for commerce, not insurgents. *Ibid.*, 3.

53. Comments by Vali Nasr, senior advisor to U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, made at the Brussels Forum on March 26, 2010.

54. U.S. Department of State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, 14.

55. Comments of Fauziya Kofi, Afghan parliamentarian, Brussels Forum, March 26, 2010.

56. In explaining the rationale for “reintegration.” Holbrooke added that “McChrystal himself said over the weekend he’ll never be able to do that.” See interview with Richard Holbrooke, United States Special Envoy For Afghanistan And Pakistan, “The Daily Rundown,” MSNBC, January 25, 2010, <http://www6.lexisnexis.com/publisher/EndUser?Action=UserDisplayFullDocument&orgId=574&topicId=25092&docId=1:1115343049&start=11>.

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63. Ibid.

64. Author discussions with U.S. Department of Defense officials in November and December 2009 and January and February 2010.

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66. See Jon Boone, “Afghanistan Quietly Brings into Force Taliban Amnesty Law: Taliban Reconciliation Move Criticised by International and Domestic Human Rights Organizations,” *Guardian*, February 22, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/11/taliban-amnesty-law-enacted>.

67. See GAO, *Combating Terrorism*.

68. McChrystal’s August 2009 initial assessment identified Afghan corruption and competence as a key element of any success in Afghanistan. This aspect of his assessment has generally been overlooked with observers and policymakers alike, generally focusing instead on the numbers and missions of troops. This is likely because this is the one issue over which the United States has control. See Commander NATO ISAF, Afghanistan, “Commander’s Initial Assessment,” August 30, 2009, http://media.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf. Corruption and competence across the Afghan government was also clearly identified as an impediment to success in U.S. Government, *U.S. Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*. In early 2010, the Afghan government came into stark conflict with the Obama administration over this exact issue, prompting an important if inadequate sweep of the most dubious elements of his cabinet. See Ali Sheikholeslami and Maryam Nemazee, “Afghan Government Aims to Reduce Corruption, Integrate Taliban,” *Bloomberg News*, January 27, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601085&sid=aPRDxy5fe.YU>.

69. See discussion on the role of confidence in governments and corruption as a key factor in successfully defeating insurgencies in Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Volume 4* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

70. Gilles Dorransoro, *Fixing a Failed Strategy in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009).