

TLO Reflections on the Afghanistan Study Group Report - A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. [Exit] Strategy in Afghanistan (30 Sept. 2010)

The report, *A New Way Forward*, is a timely and useful critical evaluation of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. In TLO's opinion the report's appraisal of the Afghan situation at times oversimplifies a more complex reality and the comments below briefly indicate how TLO's reading of Afghan circumstances differs. A primary concern of TLO is that the report as presented is driven by the U.S. interest in a speedy military withdrawal. Afghans and the international community at large will be better assisted by a strategy that realistically assesses how a political settlement can end the current conflict.

The report concludes with a five-point approach presented as a 'new strategy' aimed at 'realistic and attainable objectives' that are focused on 'political reconciliation, scaling back combat operations, greater domestic security, economic development, and engaging regional stakeholders.' TLO and most Afghans would applaud the realization of these objectives but the devil famously lies in the details of implementation. We are less sure than the authors of the report in how far the goals of the five-point strategy can be met in the short run and subsequently justify a sudden U.S. departure. While all five points are unquestionably desirable ends, they can only be achieved with a gradual, well-planned and well-communicated exit strategy that leaves behind a solid partnership between U.S. and Afghan governments.

We wish to call attention to several of the claims that appear to oversimplify a more complex situation.

Myth 1: *"The U.S. has only two vital interests in the Af/Pak region: preventing Afghanistan from being a "safe haven" from which Al Qaeda or other extremists can organize more effective attacks on U.S. homeland; and 2) ensuring that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal does not fall into hostile hands." (p.2) linked to the arguments that "There is no significant Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan today" (p.2).. "A Taliban takeover is unlikely" (p. 2) And "even if the Taliban were to regain power in some of Afghanistan, it would likely not invite Al Qaeda to re-establish a significant presence there" (p.5).*

Questionable: Since the Soviet War, the Af/Pak region has become an area hosting a range of radical movements associated with Al Qaeda. While Al Qaeda is certainly less visible today, TLO assessments have shown more Al Qaeda operatives and/or collaborators in Afghanistan than previously believed. For example foreign fighters called "Zarkawian" in Panjwayi district of Kandahar inspired by Al Qaeda leader Zarkawi are present, as well as Taliban cooperation with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

(IMU), the Baluch Jundullah, Iranian Sepah-e Pasdaran, the Pakistan Taliban etc. A new generation of Taliban has emerged with a more radicalized strategic vision and more far-reaching objectives. The Taliban has already regained power in significant areas of Afghanistan, already 'hosts' foreign groups and seem likely to do so in the future. It is overly optimistic to assume that this cooperation will come to an end with the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The U.S. and the world community would undoubtedly benefit from political stability in this vital region between Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia and a narrow focus on combating Al Qaeda and nuclear arsenals in Pakistan appears shortsighted. The economic potential of the Central and South Asian region can only be realized by a durable peace.

Myth 2: “The Taliban is a rural insurgency rooted primarily in Afghanistan’s Pashtun population, and succeeded due in some part to the disenfranchisement of rural Pashtuns.” (p.2) This claim is then linked to the argument that the conflict in Afghanistan is “a civil war between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns.” (p.1).

Oversimplification: The current conflict in Afghanistan is far more complicated than a civil war based upon ethnic division instigated by 'disenfranchised rural Pashtuns. First, there is substantial opposition to the Taliban from within Pashtun communities, many of whom the U.S. has actively supported for the past nine years. Second, while the Taliban draws heavily from rural Pashtun areas, geographically concentrated in Helmand, Uruzgan, and Kandahar, the current insurgency increasingly includes non-Pashtuns and, to a lesser extent, non-Afghans. TLO’s research activities in over twenty Afghan provinces indicate a presence of foreign Taliban and Afghans of Uzbek, Nuristani, Pashai, Gujar, Aimaq, Baluch and Tajik ethnicity participating in the insurgency. Similarly, the report refers to the conflict as partly 'sectarian', but does not specify if this refers to an inter-religious (Muslim) or factional struggle. The conflict is not an inter-religious struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims. The Taliban accepts assistance from a wide variety of sources including predominantly Shiite Iran. For example recently Hazara (Shiite) leaders in Ghazni, Day Kundi and Uruzgan have re-established co-existence agreements with the insurgency.

Myth 3: “The Taliban’s seizure of power in the 1990s was due to an unusual set of circumstances that no longer exist and are unlikely to be repeated.” (p.2)

Wrong: For many Afghans the current situation increasingly resembles what happened in the early 1990s (for example, the increasing “warlordism” in Kandahar). Sub-national governance in the countryside remains largely dysfunctional and underdeveloped, meanwhile ex-jihadi commanders continue to be a substantial foundation of the current Afghan government. The Taliban is expanding into the North of Afghanistan through

striking deals with local opportunists, which is similar to how the Taliban gained control in the past.

Myth 4: “Reducing the U.S. military footprint will automatically lead to a reduction among the insurgency.” (p.5).

Wishful thinking: The insurgency is unlikely to stop now when they believe they are winning. US withdrawal will only further inspire their confidence and ambition. The Taliban of 2010 is no longer the Taliban of the mid-1990s: they are younger, more resilient and radicalized force. In the foreseeable future the Afghan National Security Forces are unlikely to be able to defeat the Taliban and its morale is low. Reducing the U.S. military footprint will lessen the ability to assist U.S. allies and weaken trust in future US commitments. Afghans and Pakistanis felt deserted by the U.S. after the Soviet War when assistance to the region was suddenly cut off. This said, it is important that U.S. operations are done carefully, for example night raids and arbitrary arrests and detention infuriate Afghans.

Myth 5: “Emphasize power-sharing and political inclusion among all principal parties” (p.2).

Clarify: While in general we agree with an inclusive political approach, it is important to identify who the ‘principal parties’ are and consider Afghans’ perceptions of them and their pasts. There are few coherent principal parties in Afghanistan among whom a power-sharing agreement is possible, and instead a myriad of individual actors and networks exist. For example, today neither the “Northern Alliance” nor the Taliban are united and coherent bodies.

Myth 6: “Surveys suggest that popular support for the Taliban among Afghans is in the single digits.” (p.5)

Questionable: First, methodologically it is questionable if we can even accurately measure popular support for the Taliban when Taliban sympathizers more often than not are arrested and detained both by Afghan National Security Forces and U.S. military. Furthermore, Taliban influence is not based on popular support alone. Acceptance of the Taliban is better understood as inspired by fear and tolerated to avoid localized conflicts. In many cases the Taliban are simply the lesser of two evils.

Myth 7: “More generally, governance should depend more heavily on local, traditional, and community-based structures.” (p. 7)

Yes but how? U.S. policy in Afghanistan appears to be in the process of an overly abrupt change from an over-reliance on centralization and past power brokers to unexamined

faith in decentralization. We think substantial U.S. resources should be focused more on developing linkages between local, community-based structures and leaders and the Afghan government in a manner that contributes to peace and does not overly benefit individual powerbrokers. Our experiences indicate such actors exist and greater linkages are possible but have rarely received substantial support.

What could be done instead?

The basic goals of the five-point strategy, ‘political reconciliation, scaling back combat operations, greater domestic security, economic development, and engaging regional stakeholders,’ are unquestionably desirable ends. However, TLO suggests first addressing fundamental preconditions that can be realized in the near future and will influence these more idealistic and long-term objectives.

- Improve the partnership between the U.S. and the Afghan government, especially when it comes to information sharing and military operations against the insurgency. Public display of disunity does not inspire confidence and trust in the Afghan government or international community, including their ability to defeat the insurgency.
- Address the incoherence of NATO approaches in different Afghan provinces that arise nationally formulated engagement strategies and limited coordination.
- Fine-tune a gradual and sustainable U.S. military withdrawal that allows for more robust peacekeeping and building Afghan capacity in order to improve peace and security in Afghanistan. The focus should be more on the quality of operations than on the quantity of boots on the ground. Missions should generally be less aggressive more focused on creating long-term secure territory, development programmes and especially building the capacity of Afghan National Security Forces. Gradually decreasing the ‘aggressive’ military presence in the daily lives of Afghans will be appreciated and more effective in the long run.
- Work on key actor engagement, especially capacities of peace builders rather than accommodating spoilers. Such an approach is more sustainable than brokering power-sharing arrangement with loosely linked factions who have been powerful and abusive in the past. Instead of bypassing a dysfunctional government, strengthen linkages between modern and traditional stakeholders, and central and provincial government actors in order to improve governance and justice and allow for an Afghan solution to emerge.