Andrew Byers  
Duke University  
jab63@duke.edu  
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**U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan**

Despite President Obama’s receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, during his administration the United States has been involved in a significant number of wars and major military operations around the globe. Currently the United States has committed significant military resources to five wars: in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. The war in Afghanistan has dragged on the longest, beginning in late 2001 under the Bush administration. Each of these wars will, of course, dragged on into the next administration, with no clear victory inside for any of them. While I hesitate to describe Afghanistan with the over-used term “quagmire,” there has been remarkably little progress to show there.

On July 6, 2016, President Obama reversed himself on recently planned cuts to U.S. force levels in Afghanistan; the number of troops had been slated to drop to 5,500 by the end of 2016. Instead, Obama announced that the United States would be keeping its strength in Afghanistan at 8,400 troops. This was the latest in a series of deadline changes for U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. While the Obama administration has consistently sought opportunities to withdraw from Afghanistan and otherwise distance itself from that conflict, just as it had in Iraq, it remains clear that the United States cannot presently withdraw from Afghanistan without sending that country into further turmoil, chaos, and likely collapse. What is missing in all of this is a clear U.S. strategy that offers the prospect of a lasting military victory, as well as a clear articulation of U.S. goals in Afghanistan, a necessary precursor to building sustained public and congressional support for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Without changes to U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, the conflict there seems likely to continue on indefinitely or deteriorate over time. The civil and non-combat dimensions of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan have never been given the priority, commitment, and resources that they require. Afghanistan, as it stands now, is a profoundly corrupt, almost failed state, and the continued U.S. presence there and current levels of support for the regime have not reversed that.

To be clear: the United States can never transform Afghanistan into a modern, Western society, nor can it ever construct state built along American lines there. Afghanistan’s social, cultural, religious, political, and economic realities will simply never permit such a transformation. Any effort to do so is doomed to fail at the outset. The difficult task of “nation-building,” as dubious as such enterprise in a place like Afghanistan might be, cannot succeed if United States insists on attempting to transform it along Western lines. Throwing additional funds at the problem also will not work. What is needed is real reform on the part of the Afghan government. The Afghan government must clearly demonstrate that it has successfully undertaken the political reforms and consensus-building required to achieve the kind of political unity necessary to both serve the majority of the Afghani people and achieve victory in the current counterinsurgency effort. To do this, the Afghani government must implement serious political reforms to cut corruption—while acknowledging that such corruption can never be entirely eliminated in Afghanistan—and implement the kind of structural economic reforms that have been suggested by the IMF and World Bank. Unless the Afghan government demonstrates that it, as a partner of the United States, is equally committed to making the changes needed to achieve a victory, at least some observers have suggested that the United States consider a kind
of strategic triage when it comes to Afghanistan.\footnote{Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Afghan War: Reshaping American Strategy and Finding Ways to Win,” August 22, 2016 draft, Center for Strategic and International Studies, \url{https://cis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160822_Afghan_War_Reshaping_US_Strategy.pdf} (accessed September 14, 2016).} After all, fundamentally the war in Afghanistan is, from the U.S. perspective, a limited war. As Robert Osgood and other strategic thinkers during the Cold War pointed out, limited wars involve limited aims, limited resources, and ultimately, limited interests for the United States.\footnote{Robert E. Osgood, \textit{Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) and Robert E. Osgood, \textit{Limited War Revisited} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979).} They are wars that the United States would prefer to win, but can afford to lose. The dangers of continuing on in a limited war that involves supporting an ally unwilling to make the structural reforms necessary to achieve victory have been clearly demonstrated in past cases like Vietnam. It would be foolish to repeat such a blunder in Afghanistan.