

False Choices in Afghanistan

By Christine Fair, January 11, 2011

ISLAMABAD -- **Advocates** of the current U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan deploy **false choices** and **flawed assumptions** to defend the status quo. Proponents of "staying the course" delegitimize the pursuit of better options for ending this deadly nine-year war by reducing the debate to a dubious binary: maintain a long-term counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against the Taliban or leave Afghanistan after ignominiously "**cutting and running**." It is time to reframe this public discourse over the costly status quo and consider a new way forward.



Vice President Joe Biden, who is currently in Afghanistan and headed to Pakistan shortly, has argued, among others, that a policy of "**Counterterrorism Plus**" will more effectively secure genuine U.S. security objectives. He's right.

This approach calls for a much smaller deployment of forces that would focus upon al-Qaeda, including continued **drone attacks** on al-Qaeda and international militants both in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas. Proponents of such a plan argue for continuing the training mission of Afghan National Security Forces with a dedicated focus upon sustainability as well as continued and long-term initiatives to develop civilian capacity in the Afghan government. Obviously, this implies a sustained -- albeit a different and perhaps smaller -- U.S. presence in Afghanistan. This is not "cut and run."

As a proponent of some variant of a "Counterterrorism Plus" approach, I argue that the U.S. enemies are al-Qaeda and international terrorist groups -- not the largely parochial Afghan Taliban. Clearly, the United States must deny al-Qaeda access to Afghanistan. However, U.S. intelligence officials note that this goal largely has been accomplished: only **50 to 100** al-Qaeda operatives are presently in Afghanistan with many more in Pakistan. Yet Washington must work to ensure that Afghanistan does not again become an al-Qaeda sanctuary.

Abandoning the current aggressive COIN effort in favor of an approach targeting terrorists rather than Taliban insurgents would also be welcomed by many Afghans. **Polls show** that Afghans are increasingly disapproving in their assessment of both the presence and performance of U.S. and NATO forces in their country. Afghan President Hamid Karzai himself requested the United States to decrease the intensity of the conflict and "**reduce the intrusiveness into the daily Afghan life**." **Contrary to COIN proponents** who argue that abandoning COIN will degrade U.S. intelligence about al-Qaeda, intelligence is just as likely to improve as Afghans, who dislike al-Qaeda, may be more open to sharing information when the disliked COIN effort is scaled back and abandoned.

Washington must continue development assistance, investing in Afghan governance capacity and strengthening the Afghan National Security Forces while working vigorously to redress corruption in the Afghan government and in the donor community. To succeed, Washington will need to secure a strategic partnership with Afghanistan that permits the United States to maintain a critical presence in Regional Commands East and South to effectively operate against al-Qaeda and other international terrorists ensconced along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Karzai is likely to accede to such a partnership. He wants the COIN campaign to end, but he needs U.S. assistance, fears al-Qaeda, and resents the sanctuaries in Pakistan.

This course of action hinges upon several assumptions that are routinely rebuffed by COIN proponents who have little empirical evidence for their own claims. Each merits genuine debate.

First, today's Taliban -- a confederation of local commanders -- differ from the Taliban of September 10, 2001. The mid-level leadership has been consistently eliminated and replaced. Many of these new commanders were teenagers when Mullah Omar consolidated his organization. Pakistan recognizes that the erstwhile Quetta Shura is a declining asset, that it has little control over this new generation and thus, is struggling to control this emergent "Neo-Taliban."

COIN's proponents **ignore these realities** and rehearse the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden some nine years ago. However, **other regional experts** with decades of experience there believe that many -- by no means all -- Taliban-allied commanders would negotiate away ties with al-Qaeda with an appropriate process of reconciliation. Contrary to popular opinion, al-Qaeda is not present throughout Afghanistan; rather, it is generally rooted in the northern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan and is far removed from the Taliban in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. Those who remain committed to violence would become targets of the invigorated counterterrorism campaign.

Second, this option implicitly assumes that some sort of reconciliation with the Taliban is inevitable if not necessary. While Washington opposes this, it is an exclusively Afghan domestic affair. Washington's only legitimate interest is precluding a return of al-Qaeda. Afghans have an inalienable right to decide their future -- even if it includes actors that are deemed reprehensible elsewhere.

Third, a "counterterrorism plus" strategy assumes that the Taliban -- despite their increasingly global Islamist rhetoric -- remain focused upon Afghanistan and ousting foreigners and are less threatening to U.S. and international security than the raft of Islamist militants based in Pakistan, which *are* tied to international terrorism. The logistical dependence upon Pakistan to supply the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan limits the U.S.'s ability to demand that Pakistan abandon groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and the al-Qaeda-linked Haqqani network.

Fourth, this counterterrorism approach repudiates the conventional wisdoms about the "successes in Iraq" and the much-lauded surge there. While history alone will tell whether Iraq has in fact been a "success," **scholars** are increasingly interrogating the common wisdom that these ostensible successes in Iraq were due to the surge and General David Petraeus' COIN strategy rather than critical internal changes in Iraqi politics.

More fundamentally, **the assumptions of Petraeus' COIN doctrine simply may not apply to Afghanistan** where there are no functional line ministries, where the insurgents are rural and cannot easily be extricated from the local population, and where the insurgents are interlaced with families who may disapprove of their relatives' activities but do not want them dead.

Some skeptics of this proposed way forward predictably will deploy the "women's rights" or "human rights" cards to reject such a policy on the basis of the Taliban's appalling savagery. They have a point. But the U.S. and NATO have cultivated shady allies across Afghanistan for purely instrumental purposes, including **warlords, drug traffickers**, and other unsavory characters whose own records on these same issues are equally repugnant.

The values of a counterterrorism plus strategy are manifold. First, it decreases the loss of American life and treasure as well as many more **Afghan lives**. Second, reducing the combat operations will likely increase the amount and quality of intelligence that will better enable the fight against al-Qaeda and other international terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Third, it will temper a powerful narrative of jihadis everywhere that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is an occupation force. Fourth and perhaps most importantly, it will relieve the U.S. dependence upon Pakistan to sustain the war, freeing up U.S. national power to focus upon the international terrorists there. The Obama administration must reject these prevailing false choices and get down to the business of defining a new and better way forward.

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