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## Afghanistan: Moving Toward a Distant Endgame

By George Friedman  
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U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta suggested last week that the United States could wrap up combat operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2013, well before the longstanding 2014 deadline when full control is to be ceded to Kabul. Troops would remain in Afghanistan until 2014, as agreed upon at the 2010 Lisbon Summit, and would be engaged in two roles until at least 2014 and perhaps even later. One role would be continuing the training of Afghan security forces. The other would involve special operations troops carrying out capture or kill operations against high-value targets.

Along with this announcement, the White House gave The New York Times some details on negotiations that have been under way with the Taliban. According to the Times, Mullah Mohammad Omar, the senior-most leader of the Afghan Taliban, last summer made overtures to the White House offering negotiations. An intermediary claiming to speak for Mullah Omar delivered the proposal, an unsigned document purportedly from Mullah Omar that could not be established as authentic. The letter demanded the release of some Taliban prisoners before any talks. In spite of the ambiguities, which included a recent public denial by the Taliban that the offer came from Mullah Omar, U.S. officials, obviously acting on other intelligence, regarded the proposal as both authentic and representative of the views of the Taliban leadership and, in all likelihood, those of Mullah Omar, too.

The idea of negotiating with the Taliban is not new. Talks, as distinct from negotiations, in which specific terms are hammered out, have gone on for some time now. Several previous attempts have ended in failure, including one instance when the supposed representative proved to be a fraud. However, according to the Times report, the negotiations took on a degree of

specificity last summer. They began in November 2010, initiated by a man named Tayyab Agha, who claimed to speak for Mullah Omar. The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama regards authenticating the present offer as unimportant and the intermediary as having authority; the question on the table is the release of Taliban captives as a token of American seriousness.

The Taliban see themselves as already having made a major concession. Their original demand was the complete withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan as a precondition for negotiations. The talks have continued in spite of the U.S. refusal to comply. The Taliban shifted their position to a very specific timetable for withdrawal, something Panetta may have been hinting at last week, though not on a timetable to the Taliban's liking. Two more years of combat operations -- not to mention an unspecified time in which U.S. special operations forces will continue working in Afghanistan -- is a long time. In addition, the United States has not delivered on the release of the Taliban, an issue that has not emerged as a campaign issue in the U.S. presidential election.

Still, U.S. operations have become less aggressive. This is in part due to the season: It is winter in Afghanistan, a time of year when large-scale operations are not practical in many areas. At the same time, we are not seeing the level of operations we have seen in previous winters after Obama increased the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. This in part reflects a realization of the limits of U.S. military power in Afghanistan. Regardless of the motive, the Taliban interpret it as a signal -- and it is understood in Washington as a signal, too. The Pakistani-Taliban Channel

To get negotiations going, the United States had to reach two conclusions. The first was that negotiations could not happen without Pakistani involvement. U.S. accusations that current and former military figures in Pakistan maintained close ties with the Taliban undoubtedly were true. Conversely, this meant Pakistan represented a clear channel the United States could use to reach the Taliban. That channel permitted the Obama administration to conclude that it had no hope of meaningfully dividing the Taliban.

Certainly, the Taliban are an operationally diffuse group. Even so, Mullah Omar is at their center, with the political operatives surrounding him representing the political office of the Taliban. The line of communications with the Taliban runs through Pakistan and terminates with Mullah Omar. This means that U.S. hopes of splitting the Taliban politically and conducting factional negotiations are not realistic. Particularly after a series of attacks and suicide bombings in Kabul last fall, it also became apparent that the United States would not be able to manage negotiations at arm's length using Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his advisers as the primary channel.

The Pakistanis and the Taliban also had to face certain realities. The Taliban had claimed that the United States and its allies in Afghanistan had lost. This underpinned their demand for an immediate U.S. withdrawal; their offer to permit this without harassment was made under the assumption that the United States had a defeated military force at risk.

The reality was that, while the United States had not won the war in Afghanistan and in all likelihood could not defeat the Taliban militarily, it was far from defeated. The United States

remained, and remains, able to conduct operations in Afghanistan as and where it wishes. The Taliban have not reached the point where they can operationally defeat the forces arrayed against them. Where large Western forces exist, the Taliban must decline combat and disengage or be annihilated. As important, there is no overwhelming pressure from the American public to withdraw -- something not true of some U.S. allies. However, in this election, Obama is likely to be challenged by candidates supporting his position in Afghanistan or wanting a more aggressive stance. Mitt Romney, for example, not only rejected the idea of releasing Taliban fighters, but also said in response to a question that his strategy in Afghanistan was to "beat them."

The United States could hypothetically remain in Afghanistan indefinitely given the current cost and force structure. But we would argue that defeating a guerrilla force with sanctuary and support across the border in Pakistan, an excellent intelligence capability and units able to operate independently is unlikely. But neither, for that matter, can the Taliban defeat the coalition forces. Stalemate in Afghanistan.

This makes for a stalemate, one the Americans hope to solve by creating an Afghan state under Karzai and a security and military force able and willing to engage the Taliban. As I have argued in the past, the core problem with this plan is the same problem that existed during the Vietnamization phase of the Vietnam War. The Afghan military must recruit troops, and some of the most eager volunteers will be Taliban operatives. These operatives will be indistinguishable from anti-Taliban soldiers, and their presence will have two consequences. First, the intelligence they will provide the Taliban will cause the Afghan army offensive to fail. Second, shrewd use of these operatives will undermine the cohesion and morale of the Afghan forces. Surprise is crucial in locating, engaging and destroying a guerrilla force. Afghan security forces will face the same problem the South Vietnamese army did; namely, they will lack the element of surprise and at least some of their units will be unreliable.

Accordingly, the U.S. strategy of using the stalemate to construct a capable military force accordingly looks unlikely to succeed even leaving aside the issue of the fragmentation of the Afghan nation and the Karzai government's internal problems. The Taliban are intimately familiar with the U.S. dilemma and are positioned to choose from two strategies. One is to increase their tempo of operations and so increase American casualties prior to the November elections. But this strategy would see Taliban casualties increase even more dramatically, and its impact on the elections would be unclear to say the least. The Taliban are more likely to pursue the second strategy, which involves accepting the stalemate and permitting the United States to try to build an Afghan military.

Like the Taliban, the United States is aware of the difficulty of building an Afghan army. It also understands that deploying troops in Afghanistan is unlikely to lead anywhere. It does not have to flee defeat in Afghanistan, but there are strategic reasons for leaving, beginning with the fact that the military situation is about as satisfactory as it likely ever will be. Improving the situation would incur costs without yielding anything like victory. With the United States reducing its military budget, serious issues emerging in Iran and throughout the Arab World, and a new emphasis by the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force on the Pacific, the world is moving on. A violent yet frozen conflict in Afghanistan simply does not benefit the United States.

This, of course, leaves a crucial question: Will Afghanistan become a base for al Qaeda or follow-on transnational jihadist groups in the event of a U.S. withdrawal? It is true that these groups can form anywhere, but the fact is that they did form in Afghanistan while Mullah Omar was in charge. The negotiators undoubtedly have promised that, in exchange for withdrawal, they will take responsibility for suppressing jihadist elements. But trusting the Taliban, or trusting those in Pakistan who took violent offense at the killing of Osama bin Laden, poses obvious risks for the United States. In truth, it does not increase the risk much: Afghanistan is not necessary for the jihadists, but it is naturally fragmented and the threat of its re-emergence as a sanctuary is always there. Even so, the issue will remain a sticking point in the negotiations.

The United States will want a residual force to deal with the jihadist threat, something the Taliban and Pakistan will oppose. The Pakistani Role In this sense, the negotiations really come down to Pakistan and the burden it is willing to undertake in the event of a U.S. withdrawal. The United States does not trust the Taliban or many of those Pakistani officials speaking to and for the Taliban. But the United States also knows two things. First, that the future of Afghanistan is of fundamental interest to Pakistan. Instability or Indian or Iranian influence in Pakistan is not in Pakistan's interest. Therefore, the Pakistanis will play a leading role in Afghanistan as they did after the end of the Soviet occupation. Second, the United States knows that India remains Pakistan's major adversary.

The Pakistanis have tried to play the China card to make the United States nervous about Pakistan. But the fact is that the Chinese People's Liberation Army does not have the training and logistics to support Pakistan against India, and the last thing Pakistan wants is a large Chinese military deployment in Pakistan. Indeed, that is the last thing China wants. The issue over time will boil down to this: The United States will want a coalition government in which Taliban elements take Cabinet positions in the current structure of the Karzai regime. The Taliban will want an entirely new government in which elements of the existing power structure (Karzai has promised not to seek a third term when his current one ends in 2014) might have a position but that would be an altogether new regime. In either case, the Taliban assume, as the North Vietnamese assumed a generation ago, that a political settlement followed by a U.S. withdrawal would, after a "decent interval," result in a Taliban-dominated regime. Ultimately, the United States could remain in Afghanistan indefinitely and there is nothing the Taliban could do about it. But the United States cannot defeat the Taliban.

The Taliban have nowhere to go and no desire to leave. The United States has other issues to attend to and no overriding strategic interest in Afghanistan. From the American point of view, its presence in Afghanistan does not reduce Islamist threats to the homeland but it does absorb military resources. What the United States is engaged in now, as it was in 1971, is the complex process of crafting a political path from the current situation to the inevitable end. This isn't easy, since the manner in which the United States withdraws will influence its position in the region as much as its indefinite presence would. This is why the administration is so eager to pursue the current initiative and prepared to release prisoners as a gesture. It is also why the Taliban will accept a coalition government for a while, and why Pakistan will make and likely honor guarantees. However this war is brought to an end will be a complex and time-consuming process, during which the fighting will continue. But then the how is never trivial in ending a war.