

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**The Future Challenge of the Iraq and Afghan-Pakistan Wars**

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February 23, 2009

**Q1: What are the resource conflicts between Afghanistan and Iraq? Does the United States need to rush out of Iraq or delay on Afghanistan? What are the trade-offs? Can the United States do both?**

**A1:** Everything depends on whether Iraq moves steadily toward peaceful political accommodation and how quickly the situation deteriorates or improves in Afghanistan and Pakistan. If Iraq moves forward peacefully, the United States can provide the troops that Afghanistan needs during at least the coming year, and the drop in the cost of the Iraq war should ease the strain of spending more on the Afghan-Pakistan conflict. Commanders warn, however, that the situation in Iraq remains delicate and uncertain and that Arab-Kurdish tension, Sunni-Shiite tension, the threat from al Qaeda in Iraq, intra-Shiite tension involving the Mahdi Army and other militias, intra-Sunni tension involving the Sons of Iraq, pressure from Iran, and a major drop in Iraqi oil revenues all present significant risks.

On the other hand, the 17,000 new troops pledged for Afghanistan are the bare minimum needed to meet command requests, Pakistan is not yet fully committing its forces to the fight, the Afghan government is weak and corrupt, and massive waste and abuse is damaging the U.S., NATO/ISAF, and Afghan government effort in the Afghan-Pakistan war. The cost of the war should not be a critical issue, but the United States may be confronted with high-risk trade-offs between keeping troops in Iraq or providing adequate forces for Afghanistan.

**Q2: What is the United States doing in Iraq? Why is it important? Isn't the real priority the other war?**

**A2:** Pakistan may be the center of gravity for al Qaeda and the war on terrorism, but Iraq is critical to containing Iran, stabilizing the Gulf and world oil exports, and fueling the global economy. Both conflicts involve critical strategic interests.

**Q3: Why do we care about Afghanistan if the Taliban are a local threat and al Qaeda is based in Pakistan? If the real enemy has a sanctuary in another country, why should we take on the Afghan problem?**

**A3:** There is no easy answer to this question, but a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan would probably create a new sanctuary for al Qaeda and extremist and terrorist movements throughout the region, inspire terrorists and extremists throughout the world, and make any lasting victory in Pakistan impossible. The fact remains, however, that Pakistan is the strategic center of gravity and its future is far more important to the United States than that of Afghanistan.

**Q4: Can the United States win in Afghanistan if it doesn't have a convincing plan and option to win in Pakistan?**

**A4:** No. It is clear that securing Afghanistan may be impossible as long as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchi region of Pakistan remain sanctuaries for the Taliban, Hekmatyar, and Haqqani insurgents. More importantly, securing Afghanistan would still be a defeat if Pakistan remained unstable and was a de facto sanctuary for al Qaeda and extremist movements. To win, the United States must have an effective strategy for dealing with the political, military, and economic dimensions of the fighting in both countries.

**Q5: It is nice to talk about the nonmilitary dimension. Where do the people and resources come from? What does this really mean?**

**A5:** It is easy to talk about "soft power" and "smart power," but more than 1,000 of the people in the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams are military and less than 50 are civilians. A "win, hold, build" strategy requires as much effort in providing local security, governance, and economic aid as success in combat, but the United States' only present source of the people it needs is now largely military.

**Q6: If the United States shifts to "clear, hold, build," what does this really cost? Can it really be done even with 30,000 more men? Is this an open-ended fight?**

**A6:** It will be a month or more before the United States can hope to have an integrated campaign plan and strategy proposed by the president, drawing on the expertise of the country teams and key commanders like General David Petraeus and General David McKiernan. They will have to define the level of risk, the forces needed, and how long the war may continue. The last seven years,

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however, have seen a sharp and steady rise in the level of the threat, and it is not clear that adequate troop levels and resources are currently available.

**Q7: If the United States does fix the military dimension, who fixes a corrupt set of governments and a corrupt and wasteful civilian aid process?**

**A7:** This is a critical problem in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States must ensure that sufficient military and civilian aid workers are present in the field, tie aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan to the honest elements in these governments, clear audits of all expenditure, and have clear measures of effectiveness. At present, the aid effort is far too corrupt, incompetent, and wasteful. It lacks integration and is not focused on critical short-term needs.

**Q8: Is this affordable at a time of economic crisis? Does the United States have another \$12 billion a month for war?**

**A8:** The wars should now be much cheaper if Iraq moves toward political accommodation and stability, and if the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan does not radically deteriorate. In any case, the total cost of the wars seems affordable when seen as a percent of our total defense spending, federal budget, and economy. Another way of looking at the question is can the United States afford to lose the security of the Gulf or the fight against al Qaeda or a nuclear Pakistan?

**Q9: Where is the plan after seven years? Where is the transparency?**

**A9:** This is a challenge that President Barack Obama must fully meet. The American people must know what is happening, see detailed plans that they can trust, and believe sacrifice is needed. None of these tests have previously been met with any integrity or honesty: No details, no plans, and no transparency; just “spin” and empty rhetoric.

**Q10: Can the United States trust NATO? The United Nations? Karzai? Symbolism doesn't count. What are the real-world options?**

**A10:** We aren't perfect, and we don't live in a perfect world. The United States has real allies, but they have limits, and there are few prospects of either suddenly changing NATO/ISAF or finding the perfect leader and government for Iraq, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. The United States will need to press its allies to do as much as they can and local regimes for political reform, but it will have to assume much of the burden. The key in military terms may well be to build up Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani security forces—not seek major new forces from NATO.

**Q11: Four to five more years?**

**A11:** The peak fighting in Iraq seems to be over, and the course of the war in Afghanistan will either be reversed during 2009 to 2010 or the war will be lost. It will take four to five years, however, to build fully independent Iraqi and Afghan security forces and help Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to build the improved governance and economic efforts critical to match military success. Only failure can be quick.

**Q12: Why isn't containment an option?**

**A12:** The United States will be forced into containment if it sees Iraq collapse into internal strife or come under Iranian influence, if Afghanistan is taken over by the Taliban and extremists, and if Pakistan fails as a state or becomes an extremist state with nuclear weapons. What is far from clear is that any such defeat will be cheaper or easier to live with than pursuing a reasonable definition of victory in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It is easy to talk in broad terms about the ease “containment”; defining it in practical terms is far more difficult.

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