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## The State of the War

We believe that the United States has a powerful national interest in Afghanistan, in depriving Al Qaeda of a safe haven on either side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This country would also do enormous damage to its moral and strategic standing if it now simply abandoned the Afghan people to the Taliban's brutalities.

But, like many Americans, we are increasingly confused and anxious about the strategy in Afghanistan and wonder whether, at this late date, there is a chance of even minimal success.

The trove of military documents [recently published in The Times](#) showed, once again, why this is so hard: the weakness of the Afghan Army and the corruption of the Afghan government; the double game being played by Pakistan; the failure of the Bush administration, for seven years, to invest enough troops, money or attention in a war that it allowed to drag on until it has now become the longest in the nation's history.

The WikiLeaks documents, however, end in late 2009 and don't show us how the war is going now or whether President Obama's decision in December to send 30,000 more troops (the last won't be in place until the end of this month) has a chance of altering those realities.

The answer to that question also depends on whether President Obama and his top advisers can finally secure the full commitment and cooperation of the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, and Pakistan's military commander, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

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The first test of the new counterinsurgency strategy, in Marja, population 60,000, did not go well. American Marines drove the Taliban from Marja's center in late February, but the "government in a box" that was supposed to win over the population with security, services and honest governance didn't arrive. Competent Afghan officials didn't want the risk or the hardship of moving there.

Taliban fighters quickly began a campaign of intimidation and assassination. Many local residents have been too frightened to sign up for American-financed reconstruction projects. With too few Afghan security forces to hold the town, the Marines have not been able to move beyond Marja.

American officials say things are improving. Some schools and markets have reopened, and as of mid-July there were 21 Afghan officials working at the Interim Government Center, with another 7 to 10 positions unfilled. Marja remains isolated and dangerous.

We were told that Marja was a rehearsal for a major offensive this spring around Kandahar, the country's second-largest city and the Taliban's spiritual base. Breaking the insurgents' hold there was supposed to send a powerful message that the tide of the war is finally changing. After Marja, though, the Kandahar offensive was postponed, reinforcing the impression of drift.

Mr. Obama has promised to review his policy this December. We agree that the "surge" and his new commander, Gen. David Petraeus, need time. But reports from the ground have been so relentlessly grim — July's death toll of 66 American troops was the highest since the war began — that Mr. Obama needs to do a better job right now of explaining the strategy and how he is measuring progress. Here are some of the things Americans and American allies, who are even more anxious about the war, need to hear:

**THE PLAN AFTER MARJA** Do the president and his generals still believe that counterinsurgency — securing crucial areas and building up local governments — is the best chance for driving back the Taliban? Is it even possible? What lessons were learned in Marja? How has it changed their approach in Kandahar?

American officials now insist that it was wrong to think about Kandahar as a set piece offensive. The city is already under the formal control of the Afghan government, and they say Special Forces are already pounding the Taliban outside the city while efforts to improve services and security inside are under way. Claiming that the media somehow didn't get it right doesn't help. The White House and Pentagon need to explain clearly what is happening there.

One of the first bureaucratic fights General Petraeus won after assuming command was his insistence on spending more than \$200 million for diesel generators and fuel to increase Kandahar's electricity supply. That sounds like a sensible way to win local support.

We are concerned about the administration's decision not to challenge the control of Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's younger brother and chief of Kandahar's provincial council.

American officials have long claimed that the younger Mr. Karzai is involved in the opium trade and other corrupt enterprises. (He also has been on the C.I.A.'s payroll.) Washington's new line is there are suspicions but "nothing that will stand up in court."

How can a more credible government be built in Kandahar with Ahmed Wali Karzai still in place? What is the plan for bringing in and protecting more honest officials? And for tamping down the resentment of other local leaders who complain that the younger Mr. Karzai has grabbed all of the lucrative security and supply contracts? President Karzai could give a major boost to the Kandahar campaign by urging his brother to take a year or two abroad. Failing that, what is Washington doing to ensure that the two Karzais help rather than hinder the effort?

**A CREDIBLE PARTNER** At a recent international conference in Kabul, President Karzai said all the right things about fighting corruption and Afghans assuming more responsibility for their own security. (For a change, there were no anti-American tantrums.) Does the administration finally have a plan to get him to deliver? Indeed, we are still not clear about the benchmarks that are being set for adequate governance. Has Mr. Karzai been given a detailed list? How can Americans judge if they are being met?

Most urgent, has the administration warned Mr. Karzai of the disastrous consequences — in Afghanistan and in the United States — if next month's parliamentary elections are as tainted as last year's presidential vote? Some American officials are so worried that they are hoping a way can be found to get the Afghans to postpone the vote at least until next spring.

Confronting Mr. Karzai head-on hasn't worked. The White House has now decided to play nice, at least in public. We hope American officials are a lot franker in private about the limits of the American public's patience. General Petraeus skillfully managed self-defeating politicians in Iraq. He will need to bring that skill to bear with Mr. Karzai while cultivating a wider array of leaders. He cannot do that alone.

The constant infighting among top American officials over how deeply to invest in the war has to end. It has undermined Americans' confidence and made it far too easy for Mr. Karzai to ignore Washington's advice and demands.

**MILITARY AND POLICE TRAINING** Like everything else about this war, the effort to train the Afghan Army and police was shortchanged for years under the Bush administration. President Obama has done better, but there is still a very long way to go. News of the way an ambitious Afghan military operation turned into a bloody rout by the Taliban is the latest reminder of that.

In November, the United States and NATO opened a new integrated training mission. Its leader, Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV, has increased the number of trainers (the allies still need to ante up hundreds more), revamped the Afghan Army leadership program and standardized police instruction, including adding new literacy courses. American military officials said this week that this year's goal of 134,000 Afghan National Army troops and 109,000 police officers has already been met.

After days of discussion, General Petraeus persuaded President Karzai to support the creation of new, lightly armed village defense forces.

Still, we are concerned about a recent report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, which found serious flaws in how the United States military has been measuring the readiness of Afghanistan's Army and police for the last five years. It also described widespread problems with drug use, corruption and high attrition rates. General Caldwell said the report was based on out-of-date information; the No. 2 American commander in Afghanistan said they were developing a more rigorous system. We are eager to learn about that system and hear the evaluation.

**REINTEGRATION AND RECONCILIATION** American officials say that any exit strategy will almost certainly include some deal with some Taliban. Americans need to hear more about the plans to woo back lower-level fighters with offers of aid, jobs and security.

We also need to hear more about the plans for reaching out to the insurgency's leaders. An Afghan peace conference in June called for creating a council to negotiate a deal with senior Taliban. Washington has laid down what it insists are clear red lines: Taliban leaders must forswear all ties to Al Qaeda and accept the Afghan Constitution, with its protection of women's rights. Mr. Karzai has embraced the same conditions.

There are also reports that the Afghan president has been secretly negotiating with the Taliban and that Pakistan is eager to broker a deal. American officials say any negotiations have to be Afghan-led, while admitting they are not fully certain who is talking to whom.

We don't know if there is a deal to be had with the Taliban. We are sure that Washington cannot sit on the sidelines. The administration also needs to be thinking hard about a diplomatic strategy to engage or at least neutralize all of the region's meddling players.

**MANAGING PAKISTAN** The most alarming parts of the WikiLeaks reports were the ones that described how Pakistan's military intelligence service was cynically colluding with the Afghan Taliban, which it sees as a proxy force to ensure its influence in Afghanistan and keep India's at bay.

The administration has said and done many of the right things to try to change Pakistan's behavior: committing to long-term economic aid and constantly reminding Pakistani leaders that they are playing with fire and that extremists, on both sides of the border, pose a genuine threat to their own survival. It is not clear whether they are getting through.

Pakistan has pushed back against the Pakistani Taliban and has allowed the Americans to fly drone strikes against Al Qaeda and other fighters along its border. It also continues to shelter and aid some of the most destructive and dangerous armed factions fighting United States and allied troops in Afghanistan. Americans need to understand what more the administration plans to do to end this support and draw Islamabad fully into the fight — on the right side.

**THE DEADLINE** President Obama was intentionally vague last December when he said that American troops would begin to transfer out of Afghanistan by July 2011. At the time, we agreed that a deadline, so long as it was not set in stone, made sense. Americans need to know this war will not go on forever. Mr. Karzai needs to know that American protection is not open-ended. American generals and diplomats need to know that their work is being closely reviewed.

Since then, the administration has sent a host — a cacophony — of conflicting signals about the deadline, the strategy and its commitment to the war.

Americans need regular, straight talk from President Obama about what is happening in Afghanistan, for good and ill, and the plan going forward. More ambiguity will only add to the anxiety and confusion.