THIRD WAY

MEMO *Published September 22, 2011 • 6 minute read*

Hard Choices: CT v. COIN in Afghanistan

Mieke Eoyang
Vice President for the National Security Program
@MiekeEoyang

Aki Peritz

American troops are departing Afghanistan soon—10,000 by the end of this year, another 30,000 by the end of 2012. The White House projects a full drawdown by 2014, forcing policymakers to reassess America's goals in that country and whether a counterinsurgency (COIN) or a counterterrorism (CT) strategy has a realistic chance of success. This memo will both define CT and COIN and determine the building blocks for both missions to succeed.

Some in Congress have argued that we should double-down on a COIN-based strategy and remain deeply enmeshed in Afghanistan without any timelines for withdrawal. Others have insisted that we "get out" of Afghanistan as quickly and completely as possible.

We reject both of these extreme points of view and support the more centrist course that the President is following. Our drawdown in troop strength suggests that America is refocusing its overall mission in Afghanistan. We believe that based on the current situation in Afghanistan and the region, a smaller, focused CT effort is more appropriate for overall U.S. security requirements than a broader COIN approach.

The bottom line is that while CT is succeeding, doing COIN right would require many more years, hundreds of thousands more troops, and a much more robust political commitment from both the U.S. and international allies to achieve a degree of success.

Defining CT and COIN

Counterterrorism (CT) is a broad label applied to efforts taken against terrorist groups, including eliminating terrorist financing networks, sponsoring anti-radicalization campaigns, and executing military action. In this memo, we use the term in a narrower sense to refer to the identification, tracking, and elimination (either through

capture or lethal means) of terrorists. After the 9/11 attack, America pursues al Qaeda terrorists worldwide with a CT strategy that includes:

- Using high-tech hunting/tracking technologies;
- Cooperating closely with foreign countries' intelligence services;
- Exploiting military, analytical, and covert action capabilities to carry out CT operations; and
- Interpreting American and international law to allow U.S. forces to target individuals and financial assets associated with al Qaeda and affiliated organizations. [1]

As aggressive (and sometimes controversial) as this CT strategy may be, it requires relatively few American personnel to operate in hostile countries, as most CT actions are carried out by elite special forces, intelligence officers, host-nation intelligence services, and law enforcement.

On the other hand, **counterinsurgency (COIN) is the effort by a government to fight an insurgency and thereby stabilize a war-torn country.** As the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual states, "The primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government." [2] Under COIN doctrine, the goal is to create an environment where the local government can establish stability within its own borders so the local populace turns against insurgents.

For the U.S. in Afghanistan, COIN's building blocks generally include:

- Establishing security for the local population, including efforts to prevent attacks on civilians;
- Isolating insurgents from the population, protecting key infrastructure, and destroying enemy sanctuaries;
- Working with a capable, credible central government to achieve long-term goals; and

- Leveraging the full spectrum of government resources, not just military functions.

Finally, COIN requires a sustained and lengthy financial, political, and military commitment in order to succeed. Insurgencies take years—if not decades—to end. Policymakers must evaluate whether the American people have the patience and the resources to support long-term COIN operations in Afghanistan, and what the realistic chances are for success of those operations under the Administration's proposed timeline.

Bumping up Against Hard Political Realities…

Afghanistan is faced with several challenges that fundamentally undermine COIN operations:

- Afghanistan's security forces are unreliable, and its central government remains incapable of combating a full-fledged insurgency without significant foreign assistance. [3] Furthermore, Kabul does not successfully or credibly protect of civilian populations or provide essential services to many areas of the country.

- The Afghan Taliban receives sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, allowing them to recruit new members, devise strategy, and plan further attacks on U.S. and coalition forces from a place of relative safety. #

- COIN is manpower-intensive. Afghanistan has 30 million citizens, and the 130,000+ U.S. and coalition troops cannot hope to control the entire country on their own. [4] Since the military's COIN manual suggests a 1:50 troop/civilian ratio, we would have to deploy approximately 600,000 troops to the country for the foreseeable future to meet that standard. [5]

- Prevalent negative social factors such as illiteracy, tribalism, extreme poverty, decades of war, lack of credible national institutions, and a historic suspicion of outsiders mean that the barriers to a successful U.S.-based COIN mission are extremely high.

Hence, the U.S. is beginning to confront the hard political reality that achieving COIN goals in Afghanistan will require a much longer and deeper military and financial commitment to that country than may be politically feasible. Indeed, we must now consider a shift in the mission in Afghanistan to meet these realities.

...Requires America to Stay Focused On the Primary Mission

Since America's overall strategic goal in Afghanistan is (and always has been) to defeat al Qaeda, the U.S. should align that core mission with the appropriate strategy. [6] While defeating the Taliban and stabilizing Afghanistan would be beneficial to overall U.S. interests, it still remains secondary to the mission of crushing al Qaeda worldwide.

A negotiated peace in Afghanistan could bring a swift end to the conflict. Most wars are concluded not on the battlefield, but around a negotiating table. It makes sense that the White House supports efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement between the Karzai government and the Taliban. [7] An actual political settlement—and not a mere lull in the fighting—would complement the U.S. departure from Afghanistan, blunting the chances for the reemergence of al Qaeda's transnational menace.

Even if there is no negotiated peace, a CT strategy will still allow the U.S. to drawdown in Afghanistan without compromising its core mission—ensuring that al Qaeda can no longer able to strike the United States. If, after coalition troops withdraw, the central government faltered and the Taliban made significant gains, al Qaeda could conceivably return. But given the disastrous experience that befell the Taliban the first time they harbored al Qaeda, the current

leadership (with the exception of Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader) may be reluctant to repeat their mistake. [8] Moreover, an aggressive CT strategy could keep the groups off-balance. If the Taliban were to remain linked with al Qaeda, it could then be targeted by airpower and by elite U.S. military and intelligence forces operating throughout the region.

Given the current long odds of success for a full COIN strategy, the American public's growing fatigue for sustained deployments in Afghanistan, and the national security imperative to prevent another terrorist attack in the U.S., we believe America must transition to a narrower CT mission. The President's centrist stance—a drawdown followed by aggressive CT pursuit of the enemy in the region—suggests that the Administration is now committed to that path.

END NOTES

1. Eric Rosenbach and Aki Peritz, "The New Find-Fix-Finish Doctrine," *Joint Force Quarterly,* National Defense University, April 2011, pp. 94-101, Print.

2. "Counterinsurgency Field Manual," United States Army and Marine Corps, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 37, Print.

3. Lance B. Bacon, "Caldwell aims to build up Afghan forces," *The Army Times*, June 18, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.armytimes.com/news/2011/06/army-caldwell-aims-to-build-afghan-forces-061811w/; See also Joshua Partlow, "Afghan police casualties soar," *The Washington Post,* August 31, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/afghan-police-casualties-soar/2011/08/22/gIQAHxN7qJ_story.html.

4. Mark R. Haggerott, Thomas J. Umberg, and Joseph A. Jackson. "A Patchwork Stability of Consensus: Establishing Rule of Law in Afghanistan," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4th Quarter 2010, Issue 59, National Defense University, October 2010, p. 143. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-59/JFQ59_143-146_Hagerott-Umberg-Jackson.pdf.

5. "Counterinsurgency Field Manual," p.23. The COIN manual states, "twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations."

6. United States, Congress, "Authorization for Use of Military Force," Joint Resolution, 107th Congress, 1st Session, September 18, 2001. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://news.findlaw.com/wp/docs/terrorism/sjres23.es.html; See also United States, Executive Office of the President,The White House, "National Security Strategy," May 2010, pp. 19-20. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf; See also United States, Executive Office of the President, The White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," June 2011, p. 1. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

7. Ewen MacAskill and Simon Tisdall, "White House shifts Afghanistan strategy toward talks with Taliban," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2010. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/19/obama-afghanistan-strategy-taliban-negotiate; See also Paul Richter and Alex Rodriguez, "U.S. steps up efforts for talks with Taliban," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 2011. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/28/world/la-fg-afghan-talks-20110628.

8. David S. Cloud and Julian E. Barnes, "Some U.S. officials see a growing Taliban-Al Qaeda rift," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 2010. Accessed September 14, 2011. Available at: http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/11/world/la-fg-extremist-wedge12-2010mar12.