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WE HAVE THE MOMENTUM IN AFGHANISTAN

The fight is at its peak, progress is fragile, and the gains of the surge will be squandered if we withdraw our forces prematurely.

By Kimberly Kagan and Frederick Kagan

It's been 18 months since President Obama announced the Afghan troop surge, and now July 2011—the date at which he promised that a withdrawal would begin—is nearly upon us. Washington still hasn't decided whether withdrawals will be “modest,” as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is encouraging, or more substantial, as leaks to the media suggest the White House may prefer. What's clear from Afghanistan, though, is that nothing about conditions on the ground justifies the withdrawal of any U.S. or coalition forces.

The fight is approaching its peak, progress remains fragile and under assault, and we need every soldier we have—U.S., coalition and Afghan—to maintain momentum. The risks of a small withdrawal (say, 5,000 troops) are probably manageable. But any such withdrawal would be driven by politics rather than strategy.

Progress in the fight is undeniable. Coalition forces have driven the Taliban from their major safe havens in southern Afghanistan and are continuing to press into lesser enemy strongholds. The Taliban have launched operations to retake the ground they have lost, but so far to no avail.

Their tactics, moreover, indicate their weakness. Having long eschewed suicide bombings and direct attacks against Afghan civilians for fear of alienating the population, the Taliban are increasingly carrying out such attacks. The attacks, in turn, are driving a wedge between the enemy and the population, a phenomenon we have seen in Iraq and elsewhere.

There is every reason to believe that coalition forces and their increasingly effective Afghan partners can hold the gains in the south through this fighting season (that is, until November). This would allow them to create meaningful security zones around all of the major population centers in the south for the first time since 2001, but only if they have the resources and the time to do it.

Aggressive operations have managed to preserve a great degree of security in Kabul and are slowly expanding out from there. But the enemy still has safe havens within eastern Afghanistan that must be cleared before they are turned over to Afghan responsibility. So must the Haqqani network—which operates from eastern Afghanistan and is closely linked to al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, with international aspirations—be defeated.

It hasn't been possible so far to undertake such clearing operations in the east because the surge was limited to about 30,000 troops. Without the full-force package requested by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commanders first had to focus on southern Afghanistan, which was in imminent danger of falling to the Taliban in 2009. Removing U.S. forces prematurely will deny the coalition and the Afghans the ability to shift their forces to eastern Afghanistan. Afghan security forces, although holding and fighting well, are not yet able to meet the Taliban threat on their own.

Above all, the Afghan population needs confidence before it really commits to resisting the Taliban and supporting the government. It can gain such confidence only by seeing that the coalition and Afghan forces will successfully fight off the coming Taliban counterattack.

A successful fighting season this year would permit decisive operations in eastern Afghanistan in 2012. The same rules will apply to those operations, however: If the coalition can clear remaining safe havens in the east in 2012, the enemy is likely to counterattack in 2013, and the coalition and the Afghans will have to defeat that counterattack to demonstrate to the local people that the insurgents have lost and are not coming back.

This timeline of operations is fully consistent with the 2014 deadline, announced by President Obama and the NATO allies in Lisbon last year, for transferring security control to the Afghans and reducing the American footprint to whatever is required for sustained training and counterterrorism operations. This timeline would also likely permit the beginning of substantial reductions in forces in 2013, assuming that progress continues in the south as we defeat enemy counterattacks in the east.

Pressure for withdrawal is driven largely by concerns about the U.S. budget, frustration with Afghanistan's government, anger at Pakistan, and irrational exuberance about the impact of Osama bin Laden's death. But bin Laden's death isn't significant to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan today because it has no meaningful effect on popular attitudes about the likelihood of insurgent victory or defeat.

As for the other problems, premature withdrawal will make them all worse. The Afghan government will behave more counterproductively the more it believes that the U.S. isn't serious about succeeding. The Pakistani military is much more likely to double down on its support for insurgent proxies in Afghanistan if Mr. Obama reinforces its decades-long conviction that America will inevitably abandon the region. And Pakistani failures to address terrorist bases on their own territory will be compounded by the re-emergence of such sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

The economic argument for withdrawing troops faster makes even less sense. The marginal savings of pulling an additional 5,000 or even 15,000 troops out of Afghanistan 12 or 18 months early is trivial compared to the cost of failure in this effort. If we defeat ourselves in Afghanistan now, we will have to choose later whether to accept likely attacks on the U.S. homeland or to intervene militarily once again—at a much higher price than we could hope to save now. Withdrawal is a penny-wise but pound-foolish approach to an enduring national security problem.

If Mr. Obama announces the withdrawal of all surge forces from Afghanistan in 2012, the war will likely be lost. Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and other global terrorist groups will almost certainly re-establish sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The Afghan state would likely collapse and the country would descend into ethnic civil war. The outcome of this policy would be far worse than Nixon's decision to accept defeat in Vietnam, for it would directly increase the threat to the American homeland.

Americans may be tired of war, but war is not tired of us. Thousands of people around the world wake up every morning and think about how to kill Americans and destroy the American way of life. Right now, we have the momentum against those enemies in Afghanistan. This is the time to press the fight.

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