

War zone: What's the strategy in Afghanistan?

From the Editors in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

Most Americans seem to have been persuaded by President Obama's argument that Iraq was the wrong war to fight—and that the war in Afghanistan is the right one. The war in Afghanistan is seven years old and escalating, and the future is uncertain. Twenty-one thousand additional American troops have been committed, and some leaders are calling for more. It is time to ask: What is the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and how does it serve peace in the region and American interests? What strategies are being used and how effective are they? And what is the timetable for leaving?

If the U.S. aim is to defeat the Taliban, the results have been mixed: the Taliban no longer runs the country, but it certainly hasn't gone away. An ironic outcome of the fight against the Taliban is that it has strengthened the group's hand in Pakistan. If the U.S. mission is to build a stable nation, the prospects are dim. The Kabul government is weak and corrupt, and Afghanistan has never had a strong centralized government. The real power is in the hands of local tribal leaders and warlords.

Fotini Christia and Michael Semple, two experts on Afghanistan, agree with Obama that more troops are needed to stabilize the country (*Foreign Affairs*, July/August), but they contend that “no occupying power can hope to quash an insurgency by killing and capturing its way to victory. It must make friends, especially among its enemies.” Afghanistan, they say, has a history of conflicts in which the outcome wasn't decided by fighting but rather by defection. Therefore they call for the U.S. to engage the Taliban the way it has hostile Sunni leaders in Iraq, giving them practical reasons to support the coalition of Western forces that are trying to rebuild the country.

Working to reconcile the Taliban with the broader interests of the Afghan nation calls for respecting the interests of local Taliban leaders. They are not a monolithic group.

Some can be persuaded to join in nation building, say Christia and Semple, if they are given security, a livelihood and respectability—and the assurance that foreign powers will go home. “Much tea will have to be drunk to persuade commanders to realign.”

Powers as diverse as Alexander the Great, Britain and the Soviet Union have tried to subdue Afghanistan and failed disastrously. President Obama certainly knows this history. To avoid another catastrophe, the president must be held to a clear strategy and a short timeline.