

Missing Elements of a Comprehensive Strategy in Afghanistan

US policymakers should articulate a comprehensive military, diplomatic and development approach to Afghanistan. Too much public discussion in the US focuses on military troop levels in Afghanistan rather than a more comprehensive US diplomatic and development strategy. This policy brief lays out missing or under-emphasized elements of US policy in Afghanistan.

1. **Identify a clear, compelling US mission:** The US mission in Afghanistan should have one explicit aim: *to support Afghan leaders at all levels and in all sectors who are working toward an inclusive, participatory, citizen-oriented state.* Stable leadership at all levels is central to preventing the growth and spread of the Taliban and extremist groups. The lack of clarity of the US mission in Afghanistan likely reduces support from both the US public and the Afghan public for the US presence in Afghanistan.
2. **Win the “War of Ideas”:** The center of gravity in Afghanistan is not the military war, but the so-called “war of ideas.” America’s version of the Taliban, the KKK, was not defeated. The sheer force of public opinion and the rule of law against them made the KKK message less appealing and irrelevant. The Taliban narrative or storyline rallies support by condemning government corruption and foreign intervention. Other Afghans and their international supporters also condemn corruption. But their story of what a free, stable, democratic and pluralistic Afghanistan looks like is less coherent and compelling. Winning the war of ideas in Afghanistan requires a more robust effort to provide a compelling vision of a future Afghanistan that is prosperous, secure and pluralistic while it is also free from corruption, extremism and foreign intervention. US policymakers should invest more funds in building a cohesive national narrative in Afghanistan through robust diplomatic efforts to build consensus on the future vision of Afghanistan and widespread social marketing campaigns using radio, television and other media.
3. **Identify Unintended Implications of a Larger Military Footprint:** US policymakers debate whether sending more troops will increase or decrease security in Afghanistan. Despite the appeal of a quick military fix, there is no military scenario for “winning” the war in Afghanistan with sheer force or counterinsurgency. Two other troop surges in Afghanistan in the last few years have had little or negative impacts on security on the ground. Afghan public opinion polls show a concern for the extent of the US military footprint in Afghanistan and civilian casualties. For some Afghans, the large presence of US military forces is toxic, fueling more violence than it prevents. A US commitment to population-centric security is necessary and will do far more to quell extremism than enemy-centric drone strikes and attacks. Yet a prolonged counterinsurgency war against the Taliban has uncertain chances of success, huge costs, and could increase retaliatory violence and Taliban recruitment efforts. Given the broad debates about the possible unintended negative impacts of US troops in Afghanistan, US policymakers should better articulate how and why a new troop surge would not be counterproductive to US goals.

4. **Clarify Tradeoffs in US Support for the Afghan Army and Police:** All sides of the US political spectrum identify the critical role of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police in providing security for civilians in Afghanistan. Military leaders note the new counterinsurgency strategy is supplying resources and training to Afghan army and police efforts. Yet media reports continue to identify the lack of resources available to the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. Official estimates place the cost of one US soldier at between \$500,000 and \$1 million a year in Afghanistan. US policymakers should clarify the tradeoffs between US investments in US troops and their Afghan counterparts.
5. **Restore a sense of legitimate self-governance:** Afghan polls suggest the public supports US efforts to foster democracy. Yet the Taliban and other extremists seem to be making a convincing case to some elements of the Afghan public that the US is controlling a puppet Afghan government. US policymakers and diplomats should listen closely to and act in ways that are consistent with the will of Afghan public opinion polls and through extensive listening to diverse local voices at all levels in Afghanistan. US policymakers should illustrate respect for Afghan democracy, sovereignty and self-governance in all aspects of US engagement.
6. **Fund and Rally a Development Surge:** Funds for jobs, schools, roads, health centers and other development efforts channeled through Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP) help boost the credibility of the government and quell Taliban recruitment. Two-thirds of foreign aid still circumvents the Afghan government. NSP funds run through local, democratically elected, mixed-gender Community Development Councils (CDC). The CDCs facilitate a community process to assess local needs, plan, manage and monitor development projects and resources. The CDCs foster a vibrant democracy as they help make governance accountable and inclusive and address the need for sustainable livelihoods. Policymakers should call for more resources for the effective development efforts of the NSP. The CDC model can be vastly expanded to villages throughout Afghanistan and include new elements such as local peace education and traditional, informal justice mechanisms.
7. **Begin a Diplomatic Surge:** Compared with the robust discussion of the military presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, diplomatic efforts are few and far between. The US should help enable a multi-layered and comprehensive peacebuilding process along with an inclusive grassroots jirga process involving communities throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan, a national level Loya Jirga, and higher level diplomatic processes throughout the region.
8. **Explain the Taliban's Growing Influence and Resources:** Research reports indicate that the Taliban's level of resources and influence in Afghanistan is growing despite US investments in countering their influence. US policymakers should call for an investigation into the problems of stemming the flow of resources to the Taliban from other countries in the region, from the international drug trade, and from local groups that buy protection from the Taliban.
9. **Address Corruption:** Distrust of the government in Afghanistan contributes to instability. Yet it is unclear whether US policies are stemming or exacerbating corruption. US policymakers should create a comprehensive strategy including a more rigorous set of incentives and sanctions for stemming corruption in Afghanistan.

Please see future policy briefs for policy recommendations on a "Comprehensive Peace Process in Afghanistan" and "Recommendations for Tackling Corruption in Afghanistan."