By George Friedman

Washington's attention is now zeroing in on Afghanistan. There is talk of doubling U.S. forces there, and preparations are being made for another supply line into Afghanistan - this one running through the former Soviet Union - as an alternative or a supplement to the current Pakistani route. To free up more resources for Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq probably will be accelerated. And there is discussion about whether the Karzai government serves the purposes of the war in Afghanistan. In short, U.S. President Barack Obama's campaign promise to focus on Afghanistan seems to be taking shape.

We have discussed many aspects of the Afghan war in the past; it is now time to focus on the central issue. What are the strategic goals of the United States in Afghanistan? What resources will be devoted to this mission? What are the intentions and capabilities of the Taliban and others fighting the United States and its NATO allies? Most important, what is the relationship between the war against the Taliban and the war against al Qaeda? If the United States encounters difficulties in the war against the Taliban, will it still be able to contain not only al Qaeda but other terrorist groups? Does the United States need to succeed against the Taliban to be successful against transnational Islamist terrorists? And assuming that U.S. forces are built up in Afghanistan and that the supply problem through Pakistan is solved, are the defeat of Taliban and the disruption of al Qaeda likely?

Al Qaeda and U.S. goals post-9/11

The overarching goal of the United States since Sept. 11, 2001, has been to prevent further attacks by al Qaeda in the United States. Washington has used two means toward this end. One was defensive, aimed at increasing the difficulty of al Qaeda operatives to penetrate and operate within the United States. The second was to attack and destroy al Qaeda prime, the group around Osama bin Laden that organized and executed 9/11 and other attacks in Europe. It is this group - not other groups that call themselves al Qaeda but only are able to operate in the countries where they were formed - that was the target of the United States, because this was the group that had demonstrated the ability to launch intercontinental strikes.

Al Qaeda prime had its main headquarters in Afghanistan. It was not an Afghan group, but one drawn from multiple Islamic countries. It was in alliance with an Afghan group, the Taliban. The Taliban had won a civil war in Afghanistan, creating a coalition of support among tribes that had given the group control, direct or indirect, over most of the country. It is important to remember that al Qaeda was separate from the Taliban; the former was a multinational force, while the Taliban were an internal Afghan political power.

The United States has two strategic goals in Afghanistan. The first is to destroy the remnants of al Qaeda prime - the central command of al Qaeda - in Afghanistan. The second is to use

Afghanistan as a base for destroying al Qaeda in Pakistan and to prevent the return of al Qaeda to Afghanistan.

To achieve these goals, Washington has sought to make Afghanistan inhospitable to al Qaeda. The United States forced the Taliban from Afghanistan's main cities and into the countryside, and established a new, anti-Taliban government in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai. Washington intended to deny al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan by unseating the Taliban government, creating a new pro-American government and then using Afghanistan as a base against al Qaeda in Pakistan.

The United States succeeded in forcing the Taliban from power in the sense that in giving up the cities, the Taliban lost formal control of the country. To be more precise, early in the U.S. attack in 2001, the Taliban realized that the massed defense of Afghan cities was impossible in the face of American air power. The ability of U.S. B-52s to devastate any concentration of forces meant that the Taliban could not defend the cities, but had to withdraw, disperse and reform its units for combat on more favorable terms.

At this point, we must separate the fates of al Qaeda and the Taliban. During the Taliban retreat, al Qaeda had to retreat as well. Since the United States lacked sufficient force to destroy al Qaeda at Tora Bora, al Qaeda was able to retreat into northwestern Pakistan. There, it enjoys the advantages of terrain, superior tactical intelligence and support networks.

Even so, in nearly eight years of war, U.S. intelligence and special operations forces have maintained pressure on al Qaeda in Pakistan. The United States has imposed attrition on al Qaeda, disrupting its command, control and communications and isolating it. In the process, the United States used one of al Qaeda's operational principles against it. To avoid penetration by hostile intelligence services, al Qaeda has not recruited new cadres for its primary unit. This makes it very difficult to develop intelligence on al Qaeda, but it also makes it impossible for al Qaeda to replace its losses. Thus, in a long war of attrition, every loss imposed on al Qaeda has been irreplaceable, and over time, al Qaeda prime declined dramatically in effectiveness - meaning it has been years since it has carried out an effective operation.

The situation was very different with the Taliban. The Taliban, it is essential to recall, won the Afghan civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal despite Russian and Iranian support for its opponents. That means the Taliban have a great deal of support and a strong infrastructure, and, above all, they are resilient. After the group withdrew from Afghanistan's cities and lost formal power post-9/11, it still retained a great deal of informal influence - if not control - over large regions of Afghanistan and in areas across the border in Pakistan. Over the years since the U.S. invasion, the Taliban have regrouped, rearmed and increased their operations in Afghanistan. And the conflict with the Taliban has now become a conventional guerrilla war.

The Taliban and the guerrilla warfare challenge

The Taliban have forged relationships among many Afghan (and Pakistani) tribes. These tribes have been alienated by Karzai and the Americans, and far more important, they do not perceive the Americans and Karzai as potential winners in the Afghan conflict. They recall the Russian

and British defeats. The tribes have long memories, and they know that foreigners don't stay very long. Betting on the United States and Karzai - when the United States has sent only 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, and is struggling with the idea of sending another 30,000 troops - does not strike them as prudent. The United States is behaving like a power not planning to win; and, in any event, they would not be much impressed if the Americans were planning to win.

The tribes therefore do not want to get on the wrong side of the Taliban. That means they aid and shelter Taliban forces, and provide them intelligence on enemy movement and intentions. With its base camps and supply lines running from Pakistan, the Taliban are thus in a position to recruit, train and arm an increasingly large force.

The Taliban have the classic advantage of guerrillas operating in known terrain with a network of supporters: superior intelligence. They know where the Americans are, what the Americans are doing and when the Americans are going to strike. The Taliban declines combat on unfavorable terms and strikes when the Americans are weakest. The Americans, on the other hand, have the classic problem of counterinsurgency: They enjoy superior force and firepower, and can defeat anyone they can locate and pin down, but they lack intelligence. As much as technical intelligence from unmanned aerial vehicles and satellites is useful, human intelligence is the only effective long-term solution to defeating an insurgency. In this, the Taliban have the advantage: They have been there longer, they are in more places and they are not going anywhere.

There is no conceivable force the United States can deploy to pacify Afghanistan. A possible alternative is moving into Pakistan to cut the supply lines and destroy the Taliban's base camps. The problem is that if the Americans lack the troops to successfully operate in Afghanistan, it is even less likely they have the troops to operate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States could use the Korean War example, taking responsibility for cutting the Taliban off from supplies and reinforcements from Pakistan, but that assumes that the Afghan government has an effective force motivated to engage and defeat the Taliban. The Afghan government doesn't.

The obvious American solution - or at least the best available solution - is to retreat to strategic Afghan points and cities and protect the Karzai regime. The problem here is that in Afghanistan, holding the cities doesn't give the key to the country; rather, holding the countryside gives the key to the cities. Moreover, a purely defensive posture opens the United States up to the Dien Bien Phu/Khe Sanh counterstrategy, in which guerrillas shift to positional warfare, isolate a base and try to overrun in it.

A purely defensive posture could create a stalemate, but nothing more. That stalemate could create the foundations for political negotiations, but if there is no threat to the enemy, the enemy has little reason to negotiate. Therefore, there must be strikes against Taliban concentrations. The problem is that the Taliban know that concentration is suicide, and so they work to deny the Americans valuable targets. The United States can exhaust itself attacking minor targets based on poor intelligence. It won't get anywhere.

U.S. strategy in light of al Qaeda's diminution

From the beginning, the Karzai government has failed to take control of the countryside. Therefore, al Qaeda has had the option to redeploy into Afghanistan if it chose. It didn't because it is risk-averse. That may seem like a strange thing to say about a group that flies planes into buildings, but what it means is that the group's members are relatively few, so al Qaeda cannot risk operational failures. It thus keeps its powder dry and stays in hiding.

This then frames the U.S. strategic question. The United States has no intrinsic interest in the nature of the Afghan government. The United States is interested in making certain the Taliban do not provide sanctuary to al Qaeda prime. But it is not clear that al Qaeda prime is operational anymore. Some members remain, putting out videos now and then and trying to appear fearsome, but it would seem that U.S. operations have crippled al Qaeda.

So if the primary reason for fighting the Taliban is to keep al Qaeda prime from having a base of operations in Afghanistan, that reason might be moot now as al Qaeda appears to be wrecked. This is not to say that another Islamist terrorist group could not arise and develop the sophisticated methods and training of al Qaeda prime. But such a group could deploy many places, and in any case, obtaining the needed skills in moving money, holding covert meetings and the like is much harder than it looks - and with many intelligence services, including those in the Islamic world, on the lookout for this, recruitment would be hard.

It is therefore no longer clear that resisting the Taliban is essential for blocking al Qaeda: al Qaeda may simply no longer be there. (At this point, the burden of proof is on those who think al Qaeda remains operational.)

Two things emerge from this. First, the search for al Qaeda and other Islamist groups is an intelligence matter best left to the covert capabilities of U.S. intelligence and Special Operations Command. Defeating al Qaeda does not require tens of thousands of troops - it requires excellent intelligence and a special operations capability. That is true whether al Qaeda is in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Intelligence, covert forces and airstrikes are what is needed in this fight, and of the three, intelligence is the key.

Second, the current strategy in Afghanistan cannot secure Afghanistan, nor does it materially contribute to shutting down al Qaeda. Trying to hold some cities and strategic points with the number of troops currently under consideration is not an effective strategy to this end; the United States is already ceding large areas of Afghanistan to the Taliban that could serve as sanctuary for al Qaeda. Protecting the Karzai government and key cities is therefore not significantly contributing to the al Qaeda-suppression strategy.

In sum, the United States does not control enough of Afghanistan to deny al Qaeda sanctuary, can't control the border with Pakistan and lacks effective intelligence and troops for defeating the Taliban.

Logic argues, therefore, for the creation of a political process for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan coupled with a recommitment to intelligence operations against al Qaeda. Ultimately, the United States must protect itself from radical Islamists, but cannot create a united, pro-American Afghanistan. That would not happen even if the United States sent

500,000 troops there, which it doesn't have anyway.

A tale of two surges

The U.S. strategy now appears to involve trying a surge, or sending in more troops and negotiating with the Taliban, mirroring the strategy used in Iraq. But the problem with that strategy is that the Taliban don't seem inclined to make concessions to the United States. The Taliban don't think the United States can win, and they know the United States won't stay. The Petraeus strategy is to inflict enough pain on the Taliban to cause them to rethink their position, which worked in Iraq. But it did not work in Vietnam. So long as the Taliban have resources flowing and can survive American attacks, they will calculate that they can outlast the Americans. This has been Afghan strategy for centuries, and it worked against the British and Russians.

If it works against the Americans, too, splitting the al Qaeda strategy from the Taliban strategy will be the inevitable outcome for the United States. In that case, the CIA will become the critical war fighter in the theatre, while conventional forces will be withdrawn. It follows that Obama will need to think carefully about his approach to intelligence.

This is not an argument that al Qaeda is no longer a threat, although the threat appears diminished. Nor is it an argument that dealing with terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not a priority. Instead, it is an argument that the defeat of the Taliban under rationally anticipated circumstances is unlikely and that a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan will be much more difficult and unlikely than the settlement was in Iraq - but that even so, a robust effort against Islamist terror groups must continue regardless of the outcome of the war with the Taliban.

Therefore, we expect that the United States will separate the two conflicts in response to these realities. This will mean that containing terrorists will not be dependent on defeating or holding out against the Taliban, holding Afghanistan's cities, or preserving the Karzai regime. We expect the United States to surge troops into Afghanistan, but in due course, the counterterrorist portion will diverge from the counter-Taliban portion. The counterterrorist portion will be maintained as an intense covert operation, while the overt operation will wind down over time. The Taliban ruling Afghanistan is not a threat to the United States, so long as intense counterterrorist operations continue there.

The cost of failure in Afghanistan is simply too high and the connection to counterterrorist activities too tenuous for the two strategies to be linked. And since the counterterror war is already distinct from conventional operations in much of Afghanistan and Pakistan, our forecast is not really that radical.