

## War in Afghanistan -The December Review

[Gilles Dorronsoro](#), [Karen DeYoung](#) Thursday, December 2, 2010 – Washington, D.C.



One year after announcing a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration is set to assess the current approach this month—even as officials downplay the possibility of a shift in tactics. Carnegie’s Gilles Dorronsoro—a frequent traveler to the region—spoke with the *Washington Post*’s Karen DeYoung about current U.S. strategy, the situation on the ground, and how to find a viable exit from Afghanistan.

### The Post-Lisbon Environment

Following the NATO summit in Lisbon last month, the timeline for the involvement of European and U.S. forces is clear, Dorronsoro said.

- **European Withdrawal:** European forces plan to leave Afghanistan within the next three or four years, regardless of the situation on the ground. Even while they are there, European forces will attempt to limit their casualties through restrictive rules of engagement, thereby limiting their military value.
- **American Commitment:** The United States, on the other hand, is engaged in an open-ended war with no real deadline for withdrawing troops or ceasing combat operations. U.S. combat forces will likely remain in Afghanistan beyond the nominal 2014 deadline. As other countries leave, the costs of war will be borne more and more by America exclusively, Dorronsoro predicted.

## An Unrealistic Strategy

Furthermore, the current coalition strategy is unrealistic and founded on two fundamental assumptions that are unsupported by the facts, Dorronsoro argued.

- **A Weaker Taliban:** The United States assumes that the Taliban will be weaker by next year, due to continued American military pressure. As a result, the Taliban would be forced to come to the negotiating table and the coalition and Afghan governments would be in a better position to negotiate an settlement to the conflict. However, the Taliban has been growing stronger recently, making large gains in both the north and east. In addition, the Taliban enjoys the active support of the Pakistani military, which provides the insurgents with a safe haven to rest and reorganize in the event of a tactical defeat.
- **A Stronger Karzai:** American strategy also depends on a stronger President Hamid Karzai, but all indications are that he will be weaker by next year. The state structure is already disappearing at the local level and, throughout the country, no functioning state apparatus truly exists. And even with all of the money coalition forces are spending to train the Afghan Army, the best-case scenario is that it will be able to defend a few cities but never control the border areas.
- **Irrational Focus:** The focus of coalition forces on Helmand and Kandahar is hard to justify in rational terms, Dorronsoro said. Because the British were fighting in Helmand, coalition leaders have decided they should try to win there, he noted. Kandahar presents logistical problems because of its lack of any state government beyond a few corrupt officials. Even if the military is able to clear an area, there is no Afghani state to take over and Taliban fighters will kill anyone who works with coalition forces, making hopes of holding it permanently slim.

## The Prospects of Negotiations

Though negotiations aren't guaranteed to produce an acceptable outcome, they offer the best hope for protecting American interests and avoiding an unwinnable, open-ended commitment by U.S. forces.

- **Will the Taliban Negotiate?** Responding to a question from the audience, Dorronsoro stated that while the Taliban's position is

likely to improve, many high-level Taliban want some form of negotiation. More importantly, the Taliban leadership is deeply dependent on the Pakistani military, which wants negotiation and an orderly exit of Western forces from Afghanistan as opposed to a humiliating Vietnam-style retreat.

- **The Role of Karzai:** The Taliban wants to negotiate with influential players, who do not include Karzai. Furthermore, the Pakistani army seeks negotiations so the United States will recognize its role and Pakistan's importance in a future Afghan state.
- **The Indian Problem:** Two American policy goals, containing China by playing India against it and preventing extremism from flourishing in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have the potential to work against each other. Pakistan is obsessed with India and worried about the growing closeness between India the United States. It is thus looking for a political solution that forces India out of Afghanistan, while also drawing closer to Jihadist elements in Afghanistan to counter a perception of American abandonment. While India would prefer an active presence in Afghanistan, there is some room for negotiation here, because India can live without it. What both India and the United States cannot live with in Afghanistan is jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba operating in Afghanistan and using it as a base to threaten their interests.