

# Elections, mass media and short-termism in foreign policy making: the case of Afghan war

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*After nearly eight years of conflict in Afghanistan it appears that the campaign is at its final stretch, with US and British troop withdrawals on the cards. However [Nima Khorrami Assl](#) writes that our short-termist strategies in Afghanistan expose inherent problems with the democratic process in producing effective foreign policy and that this is further complicated by an influential mass media.*

On 20 November 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that [‘the withdrawal of British combat troops from Afghanistan by 2015 was a “firm deadline” that would be met’](#), with Afghan forces beginning to take charge of security from early 2011. The United States administration has also [issued complementary statements](#) to the effect that the Afghan strategy is “on track” and that the U.S. can embark upon a “responsible” troop withdrawal by July 2011. This has already made a vast number of Afghan observers, particularly from within Afghanistan, to quietly voice their discomfort with such hasty announcements, not least because the United States’ strategic review is based on overtly optimistic projections.

Although the Taliban now appears to have lost a great deal of power and operational capability, it should not be forgotten that one main reason for this power deficit is Afghanistan’s harsh winter. It is very likely that the Taliban starts launching new offensive actions in and around spring thereby crashing the UK and the U.S.’s hopes for an early withdrawal.

Given the public’s increasing disillusionment with the war, as well as the financial military burden that is sucking scarce resources from domestic programmes that are increasingly suffering under harsh austerity measures, it becomes an interesting analytical exercise to investigate the extent to which elections and mass media in democracies hinder long-term strategic thinking and foreign policy making.

This becomes all the more interesting when explored within the geopolitical context of the rise of China and its implications for the West; a rich, authoritarian state well-positioned for long-term planning due to its scant regard for public opinion versus liberal democracies whose leaders need to ensure the continued support of the electorate in order to govern.

A key element and perceived strength of democratic governance is that succession is determined by a democratic electoral system in which citizens have an equal say in who their next leader will be. While this is cherished as a positive and progressive development among functioning democracies, it also has profound impacts on a country’s foreign policy. Politicians in democracies must appear popular to their constituents in order to safeguard their election and re-election. In terms of dealing with transnational threats this severely limits the ability of politicians to tackle/address them effectively.

As such, there is a constitutionally rooted problem that seriously affects the conduct of foreign policy. Crises can radically change the normal political calculus and once a crisis turns into a prolonged, costly commitment domestic political considerations are likely to take priority.

Many have argued that long term developmental commitments such as the provision of health care and basic education services is the best way to win the hearts and minds of ordinary Afghans and thereby thwart the recruitment and approval of the Taliban among the local population. However, policy makers in London seem to have settled on short-term strategies more popular with the general public – such as limiting the number of forces in Afghanistan. Sadly, these short-sighted policies will allow the Taliban to regroup and regain the initiative in the following years.

This means that democracies are structurally at a disadvantage in trying to develop and sustain policies that require a mastery of complex issues and call for consistency and a long-term vision to enhance the prospects of success. There are electoral pressures to pursue a course that has broad popular support, eschewing pragmatic and long-term thinking. Therefore, the price we are likely to pay is a foreign policy excessively geared to short-term calculations in which domestic political considerations often outweigh sound strategic thinking.

To understand the importance of the mass media in the realm of foreign policy making, on the other hand, one need not to go beyond the classical literature on counter-insurgency; that is, the perception of reality is as important as the reality on the ground.

Mass media are the deliverers of *a message* through which audiences comprehend and indeed form opinions on events; a process known as agenda-setting. In this way, it is no exaggeration to claim that the media have inevitably become an instrument of war. Winning modern wars is as much dependent on carrying domestic and international public opinion as it is on defeating the enemy on the battlefield. This is so given that success in the information age is defined in political rather than military terms.

Prominent among the consequences of agenda-setting effects is the priming of perspectives that subsequently guide the public's opinions about public figures. By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news as well as other news media, influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public offices are judged.

Given the role of media in agenda-setting and shaping the public opinion, it is thus an absolute necessity for media coverage of terrorism in general as well as war in Afghanistan to start focusing on the role of economic development and the need for long-term planning as the best ways towards deradicalisation. In this way, politicians will find it easier to commit to long-term planning. There should be no illusion about the fact that the media prepare the public mind.

There is also a need to encourage news outlets to adequately cover positive developments in Afghanistan since public frustration with the Afghan war has, to a considerable extent, its roots in negative media reports. There needs to be a realisation that critical reporting does not equate to negative coverage of events. In fact, critical reports could considerably assist policymakers to articulate constructive policies given the heavy presence of reporters on the ground and their in-depth knowledge of local ills, needs, and perceptions.