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APPLYING COUNTERINSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN: KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES AND NATO

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The primary objectives of the United States and allied campaign in Afghanistan are to prevent the re-emergence of a sanctuary for terrorists with global reach and to keep the country from serving as the catalyst for a broader regional security meltdown. While many analysts and commentators assert that these problems can be managed through a focused counterterrorism approach that emphasizes picking off al-Qaeda leaders piecemeal, the U.S. national interests at stake in Afghanistan will be better addressed in the longer term by building Afghan capacity to govern and secure its own territory. The desired end-state is a sustainable system that can effectively combat the insurgency and prevent the re-emergence of transnational terrorist safe havens, while also reconciling some degree of centralized governance with the traditional tribal and religious power structures that hold sway outside Kabul.

As International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander General Stanley McChrystal acknowledged in his assessment, the best available means to achieve this end in the face of determined opposition from Taliban and al-Qaeda-affiliated militant groups is through a strategy that applies the core tenets of counterinsurgency. In the Afghan context, this requires a coordinated effort along several lines of operation: security operations to clear the insurgents from populated areas, separating them from the population and preventing them from interfering with local governance; building up competent Afghan security forces, both local and national, that will eventually be able to conduct security operations on their own; supporting the development of legitimate governance institutions that are acceptable and accountable to the people; and aiding local development initiatives that improve Afghans' quality of life in order to undermine the appeal of insurgency.

This mission cannot be undertaken lightly. Accomplishing even these relatively limited objectives will be extremely costly and time-intensive, particularly considering Afghanistan's poverty, lack of resources and infrastructure, and general destitution after three decades of internal warfare. It is our judgment, however, that the most likely alternative scenarios are even worse. It remains to be seen whether the United States and NATO will devote the resources or demonstrate the political will

ⁱ John A. Nagl is the President and Nathaniel C. Fick is the Chief Executive Officer of the Center for a New American Security. The authors thank CNAS Research Associate Brian M. Burton for his assistance in the preparation of this paper.

necessary to overcome past mistakes and avert a further deterioration of regional security in South and Central Asia.

Operationalizing Counterinsurgency in Afghanistanⁱⁱ

The classic “clear, hold, and build” model of counterinsurgency is well-understood, but whether ISAF and Afghan forces can execute it is an as-yet unanswered question. After an area is cleared of insurgents, it must be held by security forces (preferably Afghan, but by ISAF troops if necessary until the Afghans can take over) that will maintain a constant presence to ensure local security. These operations are intended to create the conditions that facilitate Afghan government reconciliation with traditional local power structures to establish better-secured communities that “freeze out” future Taliban infiltration. These “oil spots” can then be expanded over time as more competent Afghan forces are trained. Of course, this is substantially harder than it sounds and requires changes from how this campaign has been prosecuted over the past eight years. We propose three ideas to put Afghanistan on a path to stability.

First, since there will never be enough international forces to cover all of Afghanistan, ISAF needs to focus its resources on securing the largest and most strategically vital population centers. ISAF troops have been spread so thin that their presence has been ineffectual in many areas: They have been noticeable enough to provoke attacks but too weak to actually provide effective security. Instead, international security forces should concentrate on establishing secure zones in the key population centers, such as Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, while avoiding the more sparsely populated areas, such as the Korengal Valley, where there is comparatively less to be gained for the expenditure of manpower and materiel.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, U.S. and coalition forces must ensure that their employment of force is not counterproductive to the paramount operational necessity of population security and gaining local support against the insurgency. In particular, ISAF forces have attracted substantial criticism for excessive and insufficiently discriminate use of air strikes, which have caused significant loss of civilian life.^{iv} While the new command in Afghanistan under General McChrystal has taken steps to rein in counterproductive uses of force, these incidents have left a legacy of Afghan mistrust that will be difficult to overcome. The most obvious means for reducing civilian casualties is to limit the use of air strikes and other forms of indirect fire to those cases where ground troops can either confirm a lack of collateral damage or are in danger of being overrun. There is no question that this will be a

ⁱⁱ This section draws upon John A. Nagl, “A ‘Better War’ in Afghanistan,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 56 (1st Quarter 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew M. Exum, Nathaniel C. Fick, Ahmed A. Humayun, David J. Kilcullen, *Triage: The Next Twelve Months in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2009), p. 16.

^{iv} See, for example, James Sturcke and David Batty, “Nato airstrike in Afghanistan kills scores,” *Guardian* (UK), September 4, 2009; Abdul Waheed Wafa and John F. Burns, “U.S. Airstrike Reported to Hit Afghan Wedding,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2008.

controversial policy shift, and it can be argued that such a decision deprives allied forces of their most crucial tactical advantage. Yet the Taliban only stand to gain more support if international forces demonstrate hypocrisy in the eyes of the Afghan people (as well as the broader Muslim world) by claiming they are there to help while simultaneously killing scores of civilians. Population security requires going to significant lengths to prevent civilian casualties, regardless of whether they are caused by insurgents or counterinsurgents.

Third, while much of the focus is now on the direct counterinsurgency role of ISAF troops, more attention and resources must be devoted to developing Afghan security forces. The preexisting numerical targets for the development of Afghan security forces are not based on the actual security requirements for the country. The current end-strength targets for the Afghan National Army and National Police are 134,000 and 82,000 men, respectively^v—not nearly enough to provide adequate security in a war-torn country of 25-30 million people characterized by mountainous terrain and poor lines of communication. Some argue that the international community should not develop an Afghan security force larger than what that country's economy can support. Under peacetime conditions their concern would be valid, but basing security force assistance targets on the Afghan economy rather than on a realistic estimate of the numbers needed to impose a tolerable level of security is unreasonable now: a basically stable Afghanistan that is a ward of the international community is far preferable to an unstable Afghanistan that threatens the international community, and is probably still cheaper than maintaining large numbers of international forces in Afghanistan for an even longer period of time.

The advisory mission has long been treated as a low priority in practice if not in rhetoric, with advisory teams assembled in an *ad hoc* fashion and provided with insufficient training and resources before deploying.^{vi} The Obama administration has bolstered the effort with the deployment of 4,000 additional troops to serve as advisors, but addressing the qualitative problems with the current security force assistance mission is as important as solving the quantitative ones.^{vii} The advisory effort must have access to the most talented and experienced personnel available, and those people must not be professionally penalized for serving in advisory roles. It must focus on developing an Afghan security force that can fulfill the mission of countering the insurgency and providing a sufficient, if imperfect, level of internal security, not on mirror-imaging the force structure of a more advanced Western army dedicated to external defense. Ultimately, the entire effort must be judged on the quality of its outputs—professional, competent, reliable Afghan

^v The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," transcript, March 27, 2009, 3, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/.

^{vi} See Captain Daniel Helmer, "Twelve Urgent Steps for the Advisor Mission in Afghanistan," *Military Review*, July/August 2009, 73-81.

^{vii} The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," transcript, March 27, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/.

forces—rather than simply on how many armed men in uniform come out of its training centers, an approach that clearly produced poor results in the first four years of the Iraq war.

The Impact on Pakistan

Afghanistan and Pakistan are locked in a mutually destabilizing embrace, and the impact on Pakistan of any changes in Afghanistan must be taken into account. The key variables are the stability of the Pakistani central government (particularly its ability to maintain control of its armed forces and nuclear arsenal) and the willingness of the Pakistani security establishment to take action against the sanctuaries used by al-Qaeda militants and both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban forces. Some analysts contend that a more vigorous military campaign in Afghanistan is likely to destabilize Pakistan by pushing militants back across the Durand Line and strengthening extremist factions within the Pakistani government.

The situation in Pakistan appeared most dire in the winter and spring of 2009, even in the absence of renewed pressure in Afghanistan, when the Pakistani Taliban seized control of the Swat and Buner districts, while militants executed dramatic attacks against state security institutions in the heart of the country. Pakistan remains in relatively fragile condition, but it has since demonstrated the ability to take on the militants when sufficiently motivated to do so. Large attacks east of the Indus continue, but army offensives over the summer and into the fall have at least temporarily reversed Taliban gains and appear to have shaken some of the preexisting ties between the Taliban and the Pakistani military. While this turnaround is mainly attributable to the Pakistani realization that the militants pose a serious threat to state security, U.S. pressure and a demonstrated commitment to Afghanistan also played a role.

One of the reasons why Pakistan cultivated Islamist militant proxies in the 1980s and 1990s is because the United States had not demonstrated itself to be a reliable security partner. An ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan would serve only to confirm to Pakistani leaders that the United States and Europe are not seriously committed to security and stability in the region, thereby justifying their continued blind eye to the presence of militants, including the leadership of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

In short, an unstable Afghanistan virtually guarantees instability in western Pakistan, instability which will inexorably spread east of the Indus, alarming India and possibly threatening the security of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. A better-resourced and better-fought ISAF counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan is only one of the components necessary for a revamped relationship with Pakistan, but it would demonstrate U.S. and NATO commitment to the region and would increase the leverage needed to convince Pakistan to take stronger action against radical militancy in its own territory.

Challenges for ISAF

The requirements of alliance management add additional layers of complexity to an already-complicated problem. For all its positive contributions, NATO's involvement in the Afghan campaign has also been problematic, hampered by muddled command structures, disputes over operational and tactical approaches, and "caveats" on the participation of some countries' forces that restrict their ability to play a constructive role. The United States, for its part, has contributed to the problem by setting unrealistic expectations for NATO's role in Afghanistan, publicly criticizing other NATO countries' contributions, and failing to fully involve the allies in the deliberations over strategy.

While it is probably not true that failure in Afghanistan would break the alliance, an early pull-out by ISAF national contingents without any evident improvement in the Afghan situation would certainly damage NATO's credibility internationally and among its own members, casting doubt on its future ability to operate beyond Europe's borders. To increase the chances of success, the United States and the allies should adjust NATO's role in the conflict in at least three concrete ways in order to minimize its weaknesses and emphasize new areas where the alliance can demonstrate its strengths.

First, the development of strategy in Afghanistan must be fully coordinated among the allies. It is evident that the Obama administration and NATO have not been synchronized in developing campaign strategy. For example, while the White House continued its prolonged review of the war effort, a council of NATO defense ministers endorsed General McChrystal's proposed strategy and his call for additional resources.^{viii} In order to remedy this, the United States should ensure active allied involvement in its strategic deliberations, even though its ultimate decisions will be guided by its own interests. The realities of democratic politics ensure that the allies are more likely to support a strategy they have helped shape than one presented by the Americans along with a request for financial and military support. A jointly developed strategy will also be better-aligned with the interests of the other member-states and will be guided by a more realistic appraisal of what NATO can accomplish in Afghanistan.

Second, the United States must lead the development of a new division of labor within ISAF. After invoking Article 5 after the 9/11 attacks, NATO was engaged by the United States only as a tributary providing forces and funding for Afghanistan to make up for American shortfalls. The United States simultaneously criticized the makeup or employment of these forces, claiming that NATO must not become a "two-tiered alliance."^{ix} Hints that the Obama administration will press

^{viii} Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, "NATO Ministers Endorse Wider Afghan Effort," *New York Times*, October 24, 2009.

^{ix} See Kristin Roberts, "Afghan row may make NATO two-tiered alliance: Gates," *Reuters*, February 6, 2008; Andrew Purvis, "NATO: Alliance of the Unwilling," *Time*, March 26, 2008.

the allies for more reinforcements as part of its new strategy suggest that this mentality endures.^x U.S. and NATO leaders have failed to come to terms with the fact that the capabilities of allied forces are not always comparable, and not all will be able to contribute equivalent combat troops. Policymakers should acknowledge that it is better for the allies to provide complementary capabilities that they actually have rather than struggle to provide interchangeable capabilities that they currently lack. While some countries contribute combat troops, others can provide logistical, training, and intelligence support to Afghan forces, or governance and economic development expertise, both of which are important long-term missions. The objective is to maintain broad alliance involvement that both enhances ISAF's ability to carry out its tasks and bolsters the continuing international legitimacy of the mission.

Third, NATO should increase its involvement in South and Central Asia regional initiatives. NATO has been unduly quiet regarding the regional aspects of the Afghan conflict. Given its multiplicity of historical, economic and diplomatic relationships throughout the region, the alliance and its members can further develop unified approaches to Pakistan, Russia, China, India, and even Iran to help mitigate some of the broader regional security dilemmas stemming from Afghan instability. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke fills this role for the United States, but NATO should have its own special envoy to coordinate allied approaches to regional issues. While Pakistan and Iran are likely to be suspicious of U.S. overtures, they may be more receptive to initiatives proposed by a different NATO member or conducted under the multilateral auspices of NATO. Such initiatives can involve improving border security, training and advising local security forces, and developing new logistical routes.

Conclusion

While there are many obstacles to prosecuting an effective counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, this approach currently offers the best chance to reduce the threat of global Islamist terrorism and to encourage stability in South and Central Asia. Any successful strategy will ultimately depend on the cooperation of the Afghan and Pakistani people to root out the threats within, and a comprehensive approach that offers basic security, improved governance, and some semblance of economic opportunity is more likely to result in this cooperation. None of the remaining options in Afghanistan is attractive, but a counterinsurgency strategy prosecuted by ISAF and Afghan forces with the full backing of the NATO alliance offers the best chance to end this war with a sustainable peace.

^x See Greg Jaffe, Scott Wilson, and Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Envoy Resists Increase in Troops," *Washington Post*, November 12, 2009.