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How to Measure the War

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How to Measure the War

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“Going forward [in Afghanistan], we will not blindly stay the course. Instead, we will set clear metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable.”

— *President Barack Obama*, March 27, 2009

HOW TO TELL if a counterinsurgency campaign is being won? Sizing the force correctly for a stabilization mission is a key ingredient — and it has been the subject of much discussion in the modern American debate. But in fact, there is no exact formula for sizing forces. Even if there were, getting the numbers right would hardly ensure success. Troops might not perform optimally if poorly prepared for the mission; the security environment might pose too many daunting challenges for even properly sized and trained forces to contend with; indigenous forces might not be up to the job of gradually accepting primary responsibility for their country's security themselves; and the politics of the country in question might not

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evolve in a favorable direction due to the actions of internal or external spoilers. So to know if we are being successful, we must also track and study results on the ground.

In conventional warfare, identifying the momentum of battle is a fairly straightforward undertaking. Predicting ultimate outcomes is still very difficult, but determining who is “ahead” at a given moment is usually feasible. Movement of the frontlines, attrition rates, industrial production of war materiel, and logistical sustainability of forces in the field provide fairly obvious standards by which to assess trends. But counterinsurgency and stabilization operations — like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan — are different, and more complex. They also appear to be the future of warfare. How do we measure progress in such situations?

In conventional warfare, identifying the momentum of battle is a fairly straightforward undertaking.

This question is crucially important. Only by tracking progress can we know whether a strategy is working. And only by examining a range of indicators can we determine how to adjust a strategy that may require improvement. For example, a counterinsurgency effort in which violence is the central challenge facing a country will presumably demand different policy responses than would a mission in which economic stagnation, or poor quality of life for citizens, or political paralysis in a nation’s government, presents the chief dilemma. In many cases all such problems will present themselves, and all must be addressed at some level — but it is unrealistic to think that all can receive equally rigorous and well-resourced responses.

Priorities must be set. Metrics can help in determining what they should be.

Assessing progress is also important because the perception of progress has an effect on the sustainability of the war effort. The theory of victory for insurgents fighting the United States and its allies is not to defeat their better equipped foe on the battlefield. It is to unequivocally demonstrate their capacity to fight a war of attrition indefinitely and then wait for political support for the mission to collapse on their enemies’ home fronts. To counter this strategy, the United States and its allies must be able to demonstrate progress or at least the reasonable expectation of progress throughout the campaign. Given the political importance of measuring progress and the very limited set of agreed-upon benchmarks, the question of metrics has become deeply controversial.

How to use metrics in the coming debate over whether the United States and its partners are succeeding in Afghanistan? To answer this question, it is important to examine the historical record for Iraq, in part because of the familiarity many readers will have with that case, and in part because the Iraq case illustrates the need for humility in applying metrics to any counterinsurgency. Such an examination yields three overall conclusions relevant to Afghanistan:

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- Unlike the case of Iraq, where trends in violence were the most important metrics for much of the war, Afghanistan presents a situation where the most important metrics are those that gauge progress in the capacity and viability of the government. Put differently, metrics are probably most important for evaluating efforts at state-building.
- Unfortunately, this conclusion suggests that metrics will not be up to the job of diagnosing clear and incontrovertible proof of progress or lack thereof in Afghanistan. Figuring out which indices are most informative regarding the state-building task is hard; making reliable measurements for whatever indices are selected is even harder. Knowing how long it should reasonably take to expect progress is also very challenging, though it is fair to say that patience will be required to assess the effectiveness of the new strategy (well into 2010 if not beyond).
- As such, even more so than in Iraq, using metrics in Afghanistan is more art than science and is very sensitive to local context. Quantitative data are very important as grist for debate, and for constraining debate within factual boundaries; they are generally not adequate to reach definitive judgments. Even if measuring progress is an art, it will benefit (more than some forms of art) from a degree of precision and rigor.

The general challenge

A NUMBER OF AXIOMS have been developed over the decades to guide policymakers as they attempt counterinsurgency, stabilization, and nation-building missions. Several concepts have been so frequently voiced that they have developed almost iconic status, e.g.:

- Counterinsurgency requires attention to three main areas of effort: security, economics, and politics.
- Successful counterinsurgency depends most critically on gaining the political allegiance of the local population. Battlefield victories are primarily important to the degree that they build or sustain support among the population.
- Successful counterinsurgency requires empowerment of legitimate, indigenous actors and cannot be achieved principally through the efforts of outsiders.
- Patience is required in counterinsurgency, as successful efforts typically take a decade or longer.
- Care and precision are required in the use of force in counterinsurgency, and as such policing functions are ultimately more appropriate than combat operations by soldiers.

The problem with such a list of truisms is not so much that they are incorrect — in fact, they are probably all generally sound. Rather, the challenge is in translating these principles into actionable policy in a given case, and in determining if efforts to do so are succeeding. It is here where metrics potentially have their greatest role.

Alas, it is easy to misuse metrics. In Vietnam, for example, the United States was convinced that there would be a “crossover point” in attrition of the Viet Cong. If U.S. military forces could manage to kill enough of them, say 50,000 a year, the enemy’s recruiting efforts would not be able to keep pace, and combined American and South Vietnamese forces would ultimately prevail. This focus on body counts contributed to General William Westmoreland’s unfortunate emphasis on search-and-destroy operations, which caused huge numbers of civilian casualties and in that way increased the enemy’s capacity to recruit. The United States and South Vietnam also fixated on the ratio of counterinsurgents to insurgents, working from the assumption that successful counterinsurgency requires ten government soldiers for every insurgent. This simplifying assumption is partly validated by history, but only in an approximate sense. By applying it too rigidly, the rule of thumb misled American and South Vietnamese policymakers, giving them too much confidence that they would be successful if only they could generate a certain number of combat forces (with relatively little attention paid to the forces’ quality or proficiency in counterinsurgency operations). As a third example, the conviction that the Viet Cong needed hundreds or thousands of tons of supplies daily led to additional bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail and ultimately Cambodia — again to no avail as it turned out that the Viet Cong in South Vietnam needed little outside help.¹ In the economics realm, the hope that pumping up South Vietnamese GDP would produce contentment among the population failed when the resulting economic growth accrued to a relatively narrow stratum of society.

The experience of successful counterinsurgency and stabilization missions in places such as the Philippines and Malaya, by contrast, tends to place a premium on tracking trends in the daily life of typical citizens. How secure are they, and who do they credit for that security? How hopeful do they find their economic situation, regardless of the nation’s GDP or even their own personal wealth at a moment in time? Do they think their country’s politics are giving them a voice?² When Bernard Fall, a historian of Vietnam and a war correspondent, wanted to understand the extent of French control in the Red River Delta of Vietnam in the 1950s, he ignored the military dispositions and looked at where the Vietnamese government could collect taxes and pay village teachers. The map he produced showed the difference

1. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 177–214; and Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Vintage Books, 1995), 169–77, 210–12, 220–23, 233–47, 262–63, 282–93.

2. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Praeger, 2005), 70–86.

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between military control and administrative control — and demonstrated that in fact the communists already controlled 70 percent of the delta without the French even being aware of it.³

The Marine Corps tended to focus on these types of “social” metrics in Vietnam and developed an approach called the Combined Action Program to help protect the population in “ink spots” that would gradually expand with time. In fact, the Marine CAP concept applied more broadly would have led to fewer overall American forces than were actually deployed, suggesting that the ten-to-one rule was *not* the optimal way to gauge U.S. force requirements. But the Marine Corps did not carry the day with this concept in the U.S. military overall.⁴ The U.S. military finally moved towards this type of thinking in Iraq — but, in general, not until 2007.⁵

The two main combat theaters where American forces have, this decade, conducted major operations may show trends that highlight key determinants of change. The case of Iraq can be used largely to learn lessons applicable to Afghanistan — but without, one hopes, overlearning them in a way that would blindly apply the same concepts to both conflicts.

Tracking change in Iraq

POST-SADDAM IRAQ has experienced perhaps three main periods to date. The first started with the fall of Saddam’s statue on April 9, 2003, and continued until sometime shortly after the capture that December of the former dictator himself — in any case, it was conclusively over by late March and early April 2004, with the terrible tragedies in al-Anbar province that began to make Fallujah and Ramadi infamous names in the United States. From that point through 2006, the insurgency grew and became interwoven with increasing terrorism and, finally, outright sectarian conflict that most would call civil war. The third period, continuing until the present, has been defined first by the U.S. “surge” of additional forces but throughout by a greater Iraqi-American emphasis on protecting the Iraqi population as the essence of military and political strategy.

After the fall of Saddam, the year 2003 was characterized by a gradually growing insurgency. It was not widely described by that term until the latter part of the calendar year, but its roots can be traced to the decisions to disband the Army and fire most Baathists from government jobs in the spring

3. Bernard B. Fall, “The Theory and Practice of Counterinsurgency,” *Naval War College Review* (Winter 1998 [reprinted from April 1965 issue]). Thank you to Terry Kelly for bringing this to our attention.

4. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 172–177.

5. General David H. Petraeus, Lt. General James F. Amos, and Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–52; Steven Metz, *Learning from Iraq: Counterinsurgency in American Strategy* (Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 1–30; and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (Penguin Press, 2006), 149–202.

of the year — if not in the very decision to invade in the first place. The proof of an emergent insurgency was seen partly in the growing frequency and worsening types of attacks, with particular focus on government institutions, key domestic and international leaders, and U.S.-led security forces. These could all be observed in the data. Evidence of a semi-organized, or at least coordinated, insurgency was also apparent in communications intercepts that revealed the ideology and, to some extent, the command and control behind insurgent activity. As violence intensified, it was increasingly hard to view the opposition as merely “dead enders” who would soon be rounded up or otherwise pushed aside.

Not all trends were bad. Because the Oil-for-Food program had weakened Iraqi living standards, and because the invasion led to major disruptions in the performance of utilities, some fairly simple aid and reconstruction efforts produced major improvements in the second half of the year. Electricity, household fuel supplies, and the like recovered fast. Irrigation canals were for the most part cleared promptly. Also, media and telephone and internet service all grew once the country's dictator was overthrown. Private vehicles flourished as well, since the lifting of restrictions on non-Baathists allowed many more people to partake of those luxuries they could afford (though most citizens were still frustrated, and expectations for an improved quality of life exceeded actual improvements in living conditions). Security forces grew fast in number, even if not in quality. And of course, Saddam as well as a number of other top Baathist rulers were caught or killed.

Overall, trends in this year were not consistently or comprehensively negative — even though we can now conclude that the year was a bad one for the country, as evidenced by the trajectory that by this time it was beginning to follow. This experience underscores important limitations of metrics:

- It is often difficult to know which metrics, in a given case, are most important for forecasting the overall direction in which a country is headed.
- There is often a time lag between when problems begin to develop and when they are clearly visible and measurable.
- Early in an operation it may be especially hard to assess trends — in large part because the starting point, or baseline, for certain metrics can be hard to identify due to poor data.

The year 2004 was when Iraq clearly began to fall apart, as evidenced most notably by a dramatically worsening security environment. Coalition troop fatality rates roughly doubled relative to 2003; Iraqi civilian casualty rates grew at an even greater relative clip, though there was still insufficient emphasis on measuring these losses carefully. Beyond the numbers of killings, many other negative aspects of the violence became incontrovertible, including the numbers of suicide bombings and of foreign terrorists infiltrating the country, as well as the growing prevalence of kidnapping and

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many more attacks on the nation's oil infrastructure.

It was still possible to look at data and convince oneself otherwise — with some economic growth trends continuing, for example, and development agencies able to document scores of new projects they were pursuing. Some measures of societal openness and political freedom were still moving in positive directions. Iraqi public opinion remained fairly optimistic about the future.

Moreover, some major battles in places like Najaf and Falluja could be interpreted as having dealt major blows to the enemy (or enemies); in fact, the August battle against Muqtada al-Sadr's forces in Najaf may well have fit into that category. Violence ebbed and flowed from region to region, so it was generally feasible to find parts of the country where trends were relatively favorable and to highlight those sectors as somehow most representative of where things were headed more generally. And the program for training and equipping Iraqi security forces was revamped and put under the able hands of then-Lieutenant General David Petraeus.

But in retrospect, things were clearly headed downward in 2004. Trends in measured security incidents were mostly bad. Most tellingly, perhaps, estimated civilian fatality rates from all forms of violence per month, according to our estimates, approached 2,000 in 2005 and 3,000 in 2006 — after having averaged less than 1,000 a month in 2003 and 1,400 in 2004. Many other trends that were not being carefully studied were also headed in an unfortunate direction (as we tried to highlight at the time in the Brookings Iraq Index, a statistical compilation of economic, public opinion, and security data), though the overall significance of these trends was underappreciated. Notably, the unemployment rate was generally not being well-tabulated, in part because tabulating it was difficult to do, and in part because prevailing official concepts of how to measure progress in Iraq did not emphasize unemployment's importance. Similar problems were prevalent in regard to medical care, educational opportunity, and other such key quality-of-life metrics. A brain drain was occurring as professionals fled the country in even larger percentages than the overall population. Finally, the problems with the security forces were not yet apparent to most, largely because good metrics for evaluating their progress did not exist. Here, the Iraq Index was also unable to track the problems, because doing so would have required more detailed (and probably classified) information on the unit-by-unit performance of Iraqi security forces in the field. Like the U.S. government, the Iraq Index emphasized the more measurable aspects of the evolution of the Iraqi security forces — days in basic training, quality of weaponry issued, pay for troops, numbers of soldiers and police in uniform — most of which aspects seemed headed in a

A brain drain was occurring as professionals fled the country in even larger percentages than the overall population.

promising direction. This is a reminder of the dangers of using the wrong metrics — or, at least, of trusting too much in the significance of any given index of supposed progress.

In January 2007, President Bush announced a new strategy for Iraq, and by February, Petraeus had arrived in Baghdad to implement that strategy. Iraqi leadership was important, too, since Iraqi security forces were a key element of the surge themselves. In fact, the surge should not be understood simply as an increase in American troops, but a basic reorientation of the combined security mission towards a focus on protection of the population. Creation of joint security stations manned by coalition and Iraqi soldiers and police who patrolled together, erection of fortifications and checkpoints in many parts of the country to thwart easy attacks by terrorists and insurgents, and pursuit of cease-fire arrangements with Sunni tribes as well as Shia militias were all key elements of the new approach.

Indeed, if establishment of joint security stations, construction of barriers and checkpoints, and other such steps are viewed as key metrics, they proved to be leading indicators of progress in the case of Iraq in 2007. At the time, however, all that could be proven with such data was that the strategy was in fact being implemented as planned — not that it would necessarily succeed. (Actually, the local cease-fires established through the so-called Awakening process were not anticipated to the degree they occurred. Rather, the initial hope had been that top-down rather than bottom-up political reconciliation measures would complement the new security strategy, when, in fact, for the first year or so what actually happened was primarily the opposite.)

Partially as a result, Iraq improved fundamentally. The rate of civilian fatalities from all forms of war-related violence, perhaps the ultimate indicator of stability in Iraq, declined by 80 percent by 2008 and 90 percent by early 2009 (relative to the 2006 peak). Iraq is now notably less violent than it had been at any point in the years 2004 and 2005 and now compares favorably with admittedly violent but still “peaceful” countries such as South Africa, Mexico, and Russia. Notably, these downward trends continued even as the U.S. surge of forces ended and America reduced its combat brigade strength from 20 to 14 (as of early 2009). With U.S. troop fatality rates down by 60 to 80 percent by mid-2008, and Iraqi Security Force casualties reduced by more than half, too, the overall trajectory of the war was fairly good — just as it had been mostly bad in 2006. Not only were violence rates much reduced, but the ability of Iraqi security forces to do their part in maintaining a more stable environment became evident in Basra, Sadr City, Amara, and elsewhere, especially in the course of 2008.

Also in 2007, the numbers of extremist leaders purged from the Iraqi security forces and other Iraqi government positions increased quite a bit (though it took a while to be confident that their replacements had higher integrity). For example, by summer 2007, almost all the leadership of the Iraqi National Police had been revamped. In retrospect, this proved to be a

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leading indicator of imminent progress, though again, it was hard to be sure at the time. Increases in the number of Iraqi security forces taking primary responsibility for local security were also encouraging. But we did not yet know for sure, in 2007, if they would be able to do so in the ethnically mixed neighborhoods in and around Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk, or in particularly tense regions like Basra and Sadr City. Only in spring 2008 were improvements in Iraqi forces validated by battlefield progress in at least some such places.

Political progress in Iraq was slow through most of 2007, especially at the national level, though it picked up as the year unfolded. Knowing how to gauge political progress is hard. It is not a matter of meeting specific “benchmarks” so much as creating a spirit of nonviolent politics and compromise, so that future disputes will be settled in the halls of parliament rather than on the streets or battlefields. Benchmarks are ways of gauging possible progress towards this attitude, but no more than that, and as such must be taken with grains of salt.

The confidence of one of us (O’Hanlon) in the new strategy grew greatly after a trip to Iraq in mid-2007, but the data themselves were not totally conclusive at that point. It was the combination of some encouraging data trends with a general sense that the United States and Iraq had developed a proper counterinsurgency and stabilization strategy that gave O’Hanlon (and colleague Kenneth Pollack) confidence — underscoring again that quantitative metrics must often be married with military and strategic judgment to reach bottom-line policy judgments in this field. The science of war, and the business of studying metrics, only goes so far.

Tracking change in Afghanistan

FOR AFGHANISTAN, THE chronology is divided into two main periods: first, the years immediately following the overthrow of the Taliban, and second, the period of gradually intensifying violence and Western involvement in the war over the past three or four years.

The initial years of the Afghanistan effort were characterized by a military engagement espousing a “light footprint” and an aversion to complex nation-building efforts. International economic and development aid was also limited in scope.

From a security standpoint, the first years of the war in Afghanistan were characterized by few international troops, the vast majority of whom were American, engaged almost exclusively in counterterrorism missions to hunt down al Qaeda and remnants of the deposed Taliban leadership. Between 2002 and 2005, U.S. troop levels grew modestly from 9,000 to 19,000. In August 2003, NATO officially took over command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that was established in Kabul in 2002 and gradually began expanding outside of the capital. From 2002 through the

first half of 2005, monthly troop fatalities rarely eclipsed single digits and monthly estimates for security incidents averaged about 50 and only very rarely went above 100.⁶

During this period little attention was given to recruiting and training capable national security forces. By the end of 2005, there were only 50,000 total Afghan forces (comprising both the Army and National Police) assigned to duty throughout the country, and of those only scant numbers were both capable and politically reliable. In 2004, ISAF began to gradually assume responsibility for security outside of the capital, first setting up a base in the relatively peaceful north. By October 2006 ISAF had taken over security responsibility throughout Afghanistan, breaking the

As Afghanistan has become a higher strategic priority, there has been a corresponding improvement in the reporting of data.

country up into five Regional Commands (RCs): East, West, North, South, and Central.

After 30 years of nearly uninterrupted war, Afghanistan now ranks at or near the bottom of nearly every international economic or quality-of-life metric recorded. While reliable data during the Taliban years are difficult to come by, reporting conducted beginning in 2003 provides adequate evidence of the daunting baseline inherited by the new Afghan government. In 2003, annual per capita GDP was less than \$200 (based on current prices). Basic services, such as health care and education, were considered luxury items. The infant mortality rate ranked last in the world at 165 per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy was a mere 42 years. During the Taliban years, fewer than a million children regularly attended school (probably about 10 percent of the school-age population) and of these few students, none were girls.

As Afghanistan has become a higher strategic priority over the past couple of years, there has been a corresponding improvement in the reporting of data. On the whole, it can be said that the situation has been trending downward. From a security standpoint, by almost any measurement 2008 represented the most violent year since the onset of the war in 2001, and 2009 is clearly eclipsing 2008 as we write. Economically, while some macro indicators continue to rise, it is becoming more apparent that the benefits of economic growth are not being shared equitably, as most Afghans continue to live below or near the poverty line. Finally, public support for the nascent Afghan central government is rather low; corruption is rampant, and there is a dearth of qualified technocrats capable of running a functioning bureaucracy.

For each of these categories, there are mitigating circumstances and silver linings. While security has been deteriorating, violence levels in Afghanistan

6. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008: Executive Summary" (August 2008), 19.

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remain far less severe than those in Iraq in 2004–07 (and, statistically speaking, the level of violence in a deteriorating situation in today's Afghanistan is roughly comparable to the situation in today's improved Iraq). In economics, there have been impressive improvements in a number of quality of life indicators, even if the starting point was abysmal and overall standards remain quite mediocre today. Politically, while the Afghan population is more discouraged than before, its support for the government and even for foreign forces remains significantly greater than that which was found in Iraq during the worst years of its war. On the whole, the trends in Afghanistan are bad, but the situation is far from irredeemable.

It should be noted, however, that just as there can be silver linings to some seemingly bad data, there can be problems that emerge from what would seem to be unambiguously good trends, too. Refugee return is a case in point. Many of Afghanistan's millions of displaced came back to their country after the Taliban fell. Alas, they returned to a land unable to adequately care for them, leading to overpopulation in Kabul and other challenges to the country's infrastructure and social safety nets.

In 2008, violence in Afghanistan reached unprecedented levels for the post-2001 period. Civilian fatality estimates reached their highest levels since the start of the war, eclipsing 2,000 according to the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). This represents a 20 percent increase over 2007 levels and more than double the 2006 estimate. Of at least as great concern politically is that an increasing number of civilian deaths were blamed on government or ISAF forces — contributing to the decline in popularity for President Hamid Karzai as well as for NATO and the United States.

Unprecedented fatality levels also struck American and coalition troops in 2008, eclipsing the previous highs of 2007. Overall, the 294 combined international troop deaths in 2008 represented a 27 percent increase over 2007 and accounted for nearly 30 percent of all such fatalities since 2001. The 155 U.S. military fatalities represent an increase of nearly a third over 2007 and make up nearly a quarter of all American troop fatalities in Afghanistan since 2001. These numbers remain significantly smaller than the 800 deaths per year that U.S. troops in Iraq suffered until 2008, but relative to the overall size of deployed forces, losses in Afghanistan have become comparable to what the United States suffered in Iraq in the 2004–07 period. Non-U.S. coalition forces suffered 139 fatalities, a jump of more than 20 percent from the prior year. This also accounted for over a third of all such deaths since 2001. Again, tallied through 2008.

Violence carried out by insurgents in Afghanistan rose considerably from 2007 to 2008. According to data provided by ISAF, there were approxi-

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mately 8,350 insurgent attacks recorded nationwide in 2007. In 2008, that estimate rose to 11,520, constituting an increase of nearly 38 percent.

As of this writing in late summer 2009, most security trends continue to deteriorate. By late August, the United States military had already eclipsed its number of fatalities from 2008, as had the NATO-led coalition overall. Nationwide insurgent attacks through June 2009 are estimated to have totaled 7,200, representing increases of 115 percent and 70 percent from the same periods in 2007 and 2008, respectively. There is, however, some ground for measured optimism. Per UN estimates, Afghan civilian fatalities as a result of violence stood at 1,080 through July 2009. Though this is still an increase of almost 20 percent from the 2007 figure of 902, it represents a decrease of five percent from the 2008

The quality of Afghan security forces is open to skepticism, especially within police ranks where corruption is widespread.

figure of 1,141. Of perhaps more importance, the share of such civilian fatalities attributed to pro-government forces (inclusive of U.S., coalition, and Afghan security forces) has declined. For both 2007 and 2008 these forces were blamed for approximately 40 percent of civilian fatalities, with insurgent groups accounting for 46 percent (2007) and 55 percent (2008). Thus far in 2009, the balance has shifted with pro-government forces taking actions that led to 25 percent of the civilian fatalities, while insurgent groups have been blamed for 66 percent.

Afghan security forces are now commonly recognized as far too small for the challenges ahead. With that consensus reached, it is important to note that it could take two to three years to reach the new target levels — underscoring the need for patience in awaiting results (as well as an exit strategy for NATO). The quality of Afghan security forces is also open to skepticism, especially within police ranks where corruption is widespread. The “CM” (Capability Milestone) scales used by Western trainers to evaluate units are of questionable merit, partly because the scoring is done by the very trainers who have responsibility for the units (and thus a vested interest in documenting progress, real or imagined), and because the political dependability of units may not be sufficiently assessed. That said, even with these somewhat skewed ratings systems, Afghan police rank very poorly in terms of proficiency and — to the extent this is measurable — dependability. A more measurable indicator of Afghan security force improvement may be the number that have appropriate mentoring teams embedded within them, and NATO units partnered with them, though of course such teams and partners are prerequisites to success rather than guarantors of progress.

Closely tied to the security of Afghanistan as well as the prospects of a more effective government is the opium trade. Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, Afghanistan has become a top producer of opium,

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providing upwards of 93 percent of the global supply from 2006 to 2008. Both the land devoted to poppy cultivation and the gross tonnage of opium produced decreased modestly in 2008. But future trends are not particularly encouraging. The international community is reluctant to take part in any substantial counter-narcotics mission not led by Afghan officials. That is likely to impose a severe constraint upon progress, considering that the corruption brought on by the trade is endemic throughout the central government, leading some to refer to Afghanistan as a narco-state. Meanwhile, it is estimated that the insurgency is funded by opium to the tune of nearly \$400 million annually.

From an economic standpoint, some of the macro indicators such as GDP, per capita income, and volume of trade have risen steadily over the past few years, and inflation has largely stabilized. However, this has not translated to greater prosperity for all, as the gulf between the very rich and the dangerously destitute continues to grow. According to the Afghan government, an estimated 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line (defined as a monthly income of \$14 or less) while an additional 20 percent lives only slightly above it. Essential services remain meager, with only about 23 percent of the population having regular access to potable water and 12 percent having access to adequate sanitation. And though there has been some recent evidence of electricity production improving in Kabul, it was estimated in 2007 that only 20 percent of the total Afghan population had even limited access to public power.

The news is not all bad, however. With the help of outside donors, the Afghan government has made great strides in providing increased access to basic health care, with 82 percent of the population now living in districts that have a basic package of health care programs, up considerably from 9 percent in 2003. This metric is of limited value for truly sick individuals, who probably still cannot access health care in many cases. But it has translated into significant improvements in the rate of vaccinations as well as infant and child mortality rates. Though literacy rates continue to linger at less than 30 percent, more than 6 million children currently attend over 9,000 schools. Gender equity is improving as 2 million of the students are girls and 40,000 of the 142,000 teachers are women. This represents a marked improvement over the Taliban years. Finally, telephone usage has increased dramatically to an estimated 7 million Afghans, up from just 1 million in 2002.

Public opinion also serves as a helpful way to transpose the various data onto local expectations, providing needed perspective even if it is notoriously difficult to poll in conflict zones. After all, it is the civilians that are the focal point of counterinsurgency missions. Recent polling sheds light on some interesting points that belie the widely perceived severity of decline in Afghanistan. When Afghans were asked what the biggest problem in their local area was, in a 2008 BBC poll, insecurity received only 14 percent of the vote, tying for the sixth most popular answer behind a host of quality-

of-life concerns such as unemployment, electricity, access to potable water, roads, and health care.⁷

Another popular theory challenged by polling is the sense that public support for Karzai and the central government has reached dangerously low levels, creating an opening for a return of Taliban control. True, approval ratings for Karzai and the central government have declined since 2005 (from 83 percent to 52 percent for Karzai and from 80 percent to 48 percent for the central government). However, when asked who they would rather have ruling Afghanistan, the overwhelming majority (between 82 and 91 percent in annual polling since 2005) reply “Current Government,” with “Taliban” gaining the favor of only between 1 percent and 4 percent of

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the respondents. Additionally, public disdain for the Taliban has remained static, with between 84 and 91 percent of respondents stating they have a somewhat or very unfavorable opinion of the group.⁸

Tactical innovations by insurgents, particularly suicide bombings that kill civilians, have not always increased the insurgents' popularity with the larger population, even in areas where they enjoy traditional support. One can infer that while there is palpable frustration with the continued ineffectiveness of the central government, the Taliban are not viewed as a viable alternative by the vast majority of Afghanistan's people.

It is worth observing that, in light of the Iraq experience as well as general principles of counterinsurgency, Kabul and the international community would benefit from additional information about the war. More numbers about the strength and composition of the insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan would be helpful, including movements across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border if possible, especially if tracked over time. Information on reforms in the Afghan security forces, particularly those concerning leadership positions, as well as information on the experience, aptitude, and political dependability of new leaders, would be enormously helpful. (The latter may only be obtainable to the extent that units, and leaders, are tested in the field in actual operations.)

Perhaps most importantly, the international community needs to better understand Afghan society — its wants, needs, and structures — so that counterinsurgents can better understand what to measure and how to measure it, as Bernard Fall did when he focused on tax rolls instead of force dispositions. More public opinion data — for example, on the degree to which farmers feel they have a viable economic alternative to opium, and on how

7. Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People” (October 28, 2008).

8. ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll, “Afghanistan: Where Things Stand,” (February 9, 2009), available at <http://abcnews.go.com/wn/International/story?id=6822139&page=1>.

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people feel about trends in the quality and safety of their lives — would also be useful. Detailed social maps that lay out the structure of land ownership and reveal who is influential in given villages and communities would help enormously to address social concerns. Tracking shipping costs for road convoys (rather than just attack levels) would be useful when considering the safety and usability of roads.

Patience and progress

DETERMINING PROGRESS IN a counterinsurgency campaign is more an art than a science. The use of concrete numbers, while helpful, should not delude anyone into a belief that results of the work are particularly rigorous or reliable. In part this is because of the difficulty of gathering and interpreting such sensitive data in such dangerous circumstances. There is in both Iraq and Afghanistan a very human tendency to emphasize that data which is readily at hand and assume it is the most telling information about overall trend lines. Thus, for example, while it is clear that economic development is crucial to progress in counterinsurgency, GDP growth is by no means an adequate representation of economic progress. Jobs, quality-of-life metrics such as water and sanitation and electricity availability, and health care are at least as important.

But more profoundly, measurement difficulties stem from the fact that counterinsurgencies are largely about achieving political effects. Political effects result from human perceptions within unique political communities. Understanding such perceptions is inherently a contextual and qualitative process, even if some quantification is useful and possible. Thus, for example, in Afghanistan, public opinion data remains stubbornly positive, even as security indicators turn downward, reflecting perhaps low expectations formed by decades of strife. But Iraq demonstrates that public opinion is also subject to very sudden shifts from discrete, highly visible events and is hard to restore once lost.

It also follows from the contextual nature of counterinsurgencies that we should expect the most useful measures of progress to vary between campaigns. The broadest conclusion about Iraq is that civilian fatality rates themselves were portending a failing mission by 2005–06 and needed to be reversed for the mission to have any hope. In Afghanistan, by contrast, weak and corrupt state institutions and a nonfunctioning national economy are probably the most important weaknesses. Documenting progress in these areas, such as the quality of security forces and judicial systems, is alas a complex and ultimately largely subjective business.

Similarly, one must beware worshipping trends while missing the forces that are building to reverse them. For example, the civilian fatality rate is a very important indicator in any war, but it often seems to be a lagging indicator of changes in momentum. This means we can see civilian fatalities

going up in the short term even as progress is being made. That could be, for example, because new tactics lead to more fighting and thus increased fatalities for civilians as well as combatants. (It is also possible, as in al Anbar province in 2005–06, that increased brutality by insurgents against civilians can lead to a subsequent backlash against the insurgents.)

We also need to be aware of our own incentives in using and abusing quantitative measures. Military leaders, who bear daily witness to the valor and sacrifice of their troops, have an incentive to emphasize the positive in order to promote strong morale. This is understandable and natural, even necessary, but it must be acknowledged so that battlefield commanders' assessments can be treated with a certain care and even skepticism at times.

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Political leaders have an incentive to spin data to maintain public support for the war effort, sometimes for partisan reasons, sometimes out of a conviction that the only way a counterinsurgency can truly be lost is if domestic political support dissipates. Some amount of message control is necessary and inevitable in any war effort, but in accepting this we must be careful not to spin ourselves.

Finally, perhaps the biggest contribution that metrics can make to a counterinsurgency campaign is to establish a foundation for strategic patience — though not blind faith. Counterinsurgency campaigns, especially successful ones, last on average over a decade. For this reason, political leaders rightly counsel patience. But skeptical publics rightly demand interim measures that can demonstrate that progress is being made. Both points of view are legitimate, even if they are in tension. On balance, however, patience is required in Afghanistan, since the main task there is to build up institutions and Afghan government capacity — inherently difficult and slow enterprises. It may be possible to gauge local progress in areas that first received increased resources. It may also be possible to document greater government control over key assets like the country's "ring road" relatively rapidly. But positive nationwide trends will likely be slower to emerge. This means that positive results in Afghanistan, if they are achieved, will likely be slower in coming — perhaps not until late 2010 even if we are successful — and more difficult to discern than those in Iraq. In that case, trusted metrics will be essential to help both leaders and the public find the wisdom to differentiate progress from quagmire and to maintain strategic patience as slow improvement is being made.