

BROOKINGS

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Improving Afghan War Strategy

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The year 2010 in Afghanistan had some encouraging signs but on balance it was less positive than had been hoped. In 2011, therefore, it is important to do two things: first, look for further improvements in our strategy; and second, develop a backup plan, should the current approach not yield the kind of progress that is necessary and expected.

This policy brief addresses the first challenge, improving the U.S./NATO counterinsurgency campaign. The basic logic of current strategy is accepted, but several new initiatives or ideas are explored to make it more promising and more effective. Three main ideas are developed:

- Promoting Afghan political organizations built around ideas and platforms, not individuals and ethnicities, in a change from longstanding American policy that could improve the quality of governance in the country.
- Taking pressure off the bilateral U.S.-Afghan relationship on the issue of anticorruption, largely by creation of an international advisory board consisting of prominent individuals from key developing countries like Indonesia and Tanzania that have had considerable success improving their own nations' governance in recent times.



Above: Reuters/U.S. Navy - An Afghan National Army radio operator stands by while an officer communicates with headquarters during a patrol at the Kabul Military Training Center.

- Offering a civilian nuclear energy deal to Pakistan, conditional on clear action by Islamabad to shut down insurgent sanctuaries that are currently using its territory to attack the Afghan government as well as NATO forces.

The past year was not without good news in Afghanistan. It saw a successful deployment of nearly another 40,000 NATO troops to Afghanistan; twice as much growth in Afghan security forces together with a much more robust approach to their training; increases in American civilian capacity in Kabul and in the field; and highly effective targeting of Afghan (and Pakistani) insurgents within Afghanistan and just over the border with Pakistan. I would also count the September parliamentary elections as more good than bad, since it was Afghans who held other Afghans accountable for infractions, and since the Karzai government appears on balance to be tolerating an outcome that will reduce the strength of its cronies in the elected assembly (though this issue remains a work in progress). Finally, NATO's decision at the November Lisbon Summit to emphasize the year 2014 as the time when Afghanistan would assume full control of security operations—rather than President Obama's earlier preference to emphasize July 2011 as the point when the U.S. departure would begin—clarified the American and international commitments to get the job done right before going home. Among other benefits, this change should help convince more Afghan and Pakistani fence-sitters that they can count on us, rather than encouraging hedging behavior out of fear of a premature, hurried NATO exit.

However, 2010 also witnessed a roughly 50 percent increase in the overall level of violence that can only partially be explained by our increased presence and tempo of operations. That increase reflects a very resilient insurgency. Problematic relations between the Obama administration and the Karzai government have also continued, the corruption problem has remained intractable (largely fueled by the western presence with all of its trappings), and the Pakistani government still tolerates sanctuaries for the Haqqani network and the "Quetta Shura Taliban" (that is, the Afghan Taliban) on its territory.

For the most part, the strategy of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under General David Petraeus, and the efforts of the international community more broadly, seem sound. The paramount goal in Afghanistan is to put the country's government in a position to control its own territory. That is the way to ensure that no large terrorist sanctuaries re-emerge there that could threaten the United States, nuclear-armed Pakistan, or other core western interests. But to achieve that goal, a comprehensive counterinsurgency approach that helps build up the Afghan state is needed, because establishing control of territory requires that the government possess a certain legitimacy among its people—which in turn requires some measure of economic and political progress. Hence, to achieve a fairly simple goal, we have properly undertaken a fairly ambitious strategy, after having tried the opposite, minimalist approach for the first half dozen years of the war only to see the Taliban make a comeback. Yet the strategy still needs improvement to address its two main vulnerabilities: the weakness and corruption of the Afghan government, and the schizophrenic approach to the war on the part the Pakistani government. This policy brief proposes ideas to address each of these problems. The proposals would also improve the prospects of any sound backup plan that might have to be considered this year, such as the concept that Brookings Senior Fellow Bruce Riedel and I have recently developed that we call a "Plan A-" for the country.

Afghan Governance and Anti-Corruption Efforts

Working with the Karzai government is an inherently complex matter. On the one hand, we have no choice but to partner with Afghanistan's elected leader, who in fact remains reasonably popular among his own people with a 62 percent favorability

rating according to the latest polls. On the other hand, the government is widely seen as ineffective by many of its own citizens, helping generate motivation and recruits for the insurgency. So do we work with Karzai, or work around him? In fact, we must do both. We need a better way to help the Afghan government improve its performance without inciting periodic public spats along the way that set back our efforts to cooperate. And we also need a way to help build for Afghanistan's post-Karzai future, the sooner the better.

Improving Afghan Governance and Fighting Corruption

General Stanley McChrystal's 2009 assessment of the situation in Afghanistan famously and dramatically concluded that corruption in the Afghan government was comparable to the insurgency itself in posing a serious threat to the country. As such, General Petraeus has been right to focus intently on corruption since assuming command, including assigning the formidable Brigadier General HR McMaster to the task, and some positive things are happening as a result. More intelligence assets are being devoted to the problem. Field commanders and development specialists are more aware of the need to understand the power of money, and to be cognizant of whom they are empowering or embittering through their contracting processes and economic development efforts.

Yet problems remain. Corruption remains very serious. And disputes about corruption with President Karzai still go public too often. The United States and the international community more generally should reframe the issue of fighting corruption, as Marine Colonel Greg Douquet and I have previously argued. The challenge should be seen and described primarily as one of improving governance in Afghanistan rather than tackling a culture of criminality.

Blatant, extreme corruption must be prosecuted. But by criminalizing routine corruption, we not only encourage unrealistic expectations in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere about the progress that is achievable over the next few years, we may miss opportunities to work with Afghan "reconciliables"-individuals who may have had some corrupt tendencies yet also try to provide a certain level of effective governance. We also fail to recognize our own past role in the dynamic. Pumping billions of dollars a year into a poor economy, and inadvertently favoring certain power brokers and tribes over others in the process, feeds the very corruption that we so abhor.

Research on fighting corruption and improving governance points to a better way of thinking about this problem. One key insight from renowned development expert Paul Collier and others is that young democracies with weak checks on presidential powers and an easy source of cash tend to have major problems with corruption-so Afghanistan's challenges, rather than being viewed primarily as criminal, should be expected in some ways. Taking this tone with the Karzai government can improve atmospherics and bolster our odds of eliciting cooperative behavior from Kabul.

Another key finding from MIT's Benjamin Olken and other researchers is that trained, independent auditors deployed from the central government to various parts of the country can improve the quality of government performance. Government auditors could also counter the "inverse pyramid" patronage network that is common in the Karzai administration, a network in which corrupt officials "invest" in purchasing government positions and their "dividends" are paid to them in the form of bribes and extortion. Reforming Afghanistan's government will require reversing this trend, or at least mitigating it, through such auditors and other governmental improvements.

And perhaps most important of all, the development literature shows that a number of countries around the world have made headway in combating corruption and improving governance over the years. Brookings and World Bank scholars Daniel

Kaufmann, Aart Kraay and Pablo Zoido-Lobaton document progress in places including Indonesia, Hong Kong, Georgia, Albania, Tanzania and Rwanda. We should try to involve more experts from such countries in the effort. President Karzai and others might react more positively to hearing suggestions about how to reduce bribes, check nepotism, and improve governance from Indonesians or Tanzanians rather than Americans.

With U.S. assistance, Afghanistan's government has improved. We are now seeing points of light in the anticorruption effort, such as President Karzai's new specialized anticorruption agency-the High Office of Oversight. Several key ministers in the Karzai cabinet are also exemplary on this front, including for example Minister of Interior Mohammadi. We should emphasize their sound efforts more often. But there is clearly a long way to go, and an international contact group may help.

Strengthening Afghan Political Parties and Institutions

Afghanistan's corruption problem is largely rooted in the fact that the young political system is still too driven by personalities-and to a lesser extent ethnicity-and not enough by ideas.

Part of the challenge is to make sure that Mr. Karzai relinquishes power in 2014, when he reaches the constitutional limit of two full presidential terms. Prudence requires that we assume Mr. Karzai will seek to change the constitution or otherwise manipulate the electoral and legal process to stay in office-not out of any megalomania, but as much as anything out of fear for himself and his friends and relatives given the uncertainty of who might follow him in office. As such, it is possible that Karzai could declare martial law and suspend future elections. He could seek a peace deal with insurgents that makes him the compromise candidate under a future modified constitution. He could even consider a military coup.

It is important to deflate this possibility before it gains momentum. U.S. policymakers should, for example, mention publicly that Mr. Karzai will no longer be president after 2014. This is unobjectionable as a point of legal fact-at least right now-so there is no reason to shy away from saying so. Talking about it enough will help clarify the international community's intentions and expectations. And given Afghanistan's long-term need for international security and economic assistance, Afghan leaders would have to take notice.

The second imperative is to strengthen Afghan political organizations. That means helping Afghanistan's reformers and patriots, of whom there are many, to form strong political movements. Mr. Karzai has chosen some good cabinet officials and governors, but these are just a few individuals. Afghanistan's organized political parties are very weak. There are some fledgling new movements-like the one spearheaded by former foreign minister and presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah. But they are loosely organized and have relatively vague policy platforms.

Afghanistan needs political movements tied to ideas and governing principles rather than ethnicity or individuals. Mr. Karzai has so far discouraged their formation. He has argued that Afghans dislike political parties because of the legacy of Communist Party abuses in the late 1970s and 1980s. But the 1980s are increasingly ancient history. Those who oppose parties today seem motivated mostly by their own desire to divide and conquer a weak, inchoate opposition.

It is time for the U.S. government and the many other governmental and nongovernmental organizations present in Afghanistan to strongly support the activities of new political movements. They should encourage and fund Afghans as they hold policy conferences, create research institutes, do grass-roots political organizing, and talk policy and politics in print, on television and on the radio. This approach need not be anti-Karzai; the president himself could form a party.

Such dynamics could affect even the shorter-term calculations of Afghan politicians. If Afghan voters in 2014 and thereafter are empowered to make real policy choices, candidates will take notice and start developing ideas they can run on. That may be as good an antidote to weak governance and rampant corruption as we can find-not only for the future but for today as well.

Getting Pakistan Off the Fence

Pakistan arguably remains the most complex ally the United States has ever had in wartime. Nine years into the campaign, we still cannot clearly answer the question of whether Pakistan is with us or against us. America needs bold new policy measures to help Islamabad-in all its many dimensions and factions-make up its mind.

Despite allowing massive NATO logistics operations through its territory and helping the United States pursue al Qaeda operatives, Pakistan tolerates sanctuaries on its soil for the major insurgencies fighting in Afghanistan. These include the Afghan Taliban (known as the Quetta Shura Taliban because its principle base remains in Quetta in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan) as well as the Haqqani and Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) networks. The Haqqanis straddle the border between the Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika as well as North Waziristan and other tribal areas within Pakistan; HiG is further north, operating in and around the Khyber Pass connecting Kabul and Jalalabad in Afghanistan with Peshawar and points east in Pakistan. Thus, all three major Afghan insurgent groups have home bases in Pakistan, and despite the occasional drone strike are generally beyond NATO's reach as a result.

Pakistan has taken some worthy actions against extremists in its remote northern and western areas in recent years. Specifically, it has recognized the so-called Pakistani Taliban (the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) as a mortal threat to the Pakistani state and responded accordingly in some tribal areas. Pakistanis argue, however, that limited numbers of ground troops combined with the past year's devastating floods prevent them from doing more. Quetta, North Waziristan, and other key places remain dens of iniquity, havens for extremists who continue to attack NATO and Afghan troops across the border and then return home for rest, regrouping, and fresh recruiting. Major command-and-control hubs are permanently located within Pakistan as well, and key insurgent leaders like Mullah Omar (to say nothing of Osama bin Laden) probably remain safely ensconced on Pakistani territory where U.S. forces cannot get at them. But it is perhaps not just a matter of available troops. Pakistan would rather have the Taliban and the Haqqanis back in power, especially in the country's south and east, than any group like the former Northern Alliance, which it views as too close to India. Since Islamabad cannot be sure that the current Afghan political system will survive, therefore, it keeps a backup plan based largely on the Taliban and its associates.

Under these circumstances, part of the right policy is to keep doing more of what the Obama administration has been doing with Pakistan-building trust, as with last fall's strategic dialogue in Washington; increasing aid incrementally, as with the new five-year, \$2 billion aid package announced during that dialogue; encouraging Pakistan-India dialogue (which would help persuade Islamabad it could safely move more military forces from its eastern border to its western regions) and coordinating militarily across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. But President Barack Obama needs to think bigger. The clarification that the U.S.-led ISAF mission will continue until 2014, and indeed beyond, at the November Lisbon summit was a step in the right direction but more is needed.

Obama should offer Islamabad a much more expansive U.S.-Pakistani relationship if it helps win this war. Two major incentives would have particular appeal to Pakistan. One is a civilian nuclear energy deal like that being provided to India, with full safeguards on associated reactors. Pakistan's progress on export controls in the wake of the A.Q. Khan debacle has been good enough so far to allow a provisional approval of such a deal if other things fall into place as well, including Islamabad's

compliance with any future fissile production cutoff treaty. Second is a free trade accord. Struggling economically, Pakistan needs such a shot in the arm, and a trade deal could arguably do even more than aid at this point.

But the key point is this: Pakistan should be told that these deals will only be possible if the United States and its allies prevail in Afghanistan. Small gestures of greater helpfulness are not adequate; bottom-line results are what count and what are needed. If Afghanistan turns around in a year or two, the deals can be set in motion and implemented over a longer period that will allow the United States to continually monitor subsequent Pakistani cooperation in the war. These terms are really just common sense, and they are based on political realism about America's domestic politics as well as its strategic interests, since there is no way the Congress would support such a nuclear deal if Pakistani policy ultimately contributed to our losing the war in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Current strategy in Afghanistan is built on reasonably sound counterinsurgency principles and is fairly promising in its prospects for the year ahead. But every such operation is different. That is a basic corollary of counterinsurgency theory, with its emphasis on local politics, conditions, and personalities—meaning that there is no reason to believe that current strategy is good enough just because its fundamentals are time-tested.

A number of other policy reforms, beyond those discussed here, may be worth considering in the coming months as well. The numerical goal for the Afghan security forces is probably still too low, and should approach 400,000 uniformed personnel rather than the current 305,000 target (this debate is well underway as of this writing). The legal system remains weak, with glaring problems such as a major dearth of judges and severely inadequate pay for prosecutors, as well as no clear strategy for linking the formal justice system to the local, traditional justice systems that remain important in Afghanistan today. Finally, in the aftermath of the September 2010 parliamentary elections, some patchwork solution to the disenfranchisement of Pashtuns in provinces like Ghazni where many of them could not vote (or had their votes thrown out) is probably needed. Perhaps some additional modest number of Pashtuns could be given non-voting adjunct status in the parliament, allowing their voices to be heard even if they were ultimately not able to win seats.

But the three changes to our current approach discussed in this policy brief are central, and have not received their due attention. On the anticorruption front, adoption of a less bilateral approach that includes a high-level international advisory body on good governance for the Karzai government could improve the tone and substance of the effort. On the Afghan politics front, the international community should be unapologetic about supporting Afghan political parties built on ideas and agendas more than personalities and ethnicities. And finally, in regard to Pakistan, an informal but public U.S. offer to pursue a bilateral civilian nuclear energy deal should Pakistan help us win the war by clamping down on insurgent sanctuaries, might motivate greater efforts by our on-again off-again allies across the border. Adoption of these recommendations would improve our prospects for at least moderate success in Afghanistan and help make 2011 the belated turnaround year that we so badly need.

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