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Toward Reconciliation in Afghanistan

How can we make sense of where the United States is in Afghanistan today? A poor country, wracked by 30 years of civil war, finds itself at the mercy of insurgents, terrorists, and narco-traffickers. NATO's economy-of-force operation there has attempted to help build a nation with very few resources. Yet, overall levels of violence remain relatively modest by comparison with other violent lands such as the Congo, Iraq, and even Mexico. Economic growth is significant and certain quality of life indicators are improving, though from a very low base. The United States is committed to Afghanistan and over the course of 2009 will roughly double its troop strength there. The international community is also seriously committed, with a number of key countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom fighting hard and applying solid principles of counterinsurgency.

Based in part on a December 2008 trip to Afghanistan with the Canadian military, I came away with the impression that the situation in Afghanistan was fairly bad, but the prospects for the future are reasonably good, at least relative to the standards and expectations of the Afghan people.[1] Since prevailing in counterinsurgency is largely about sustaining the support of the indigenous population, this is a hopeful sign. Moreover, the incoming Obama administration has made its commitment to this war clear, presumably ensuring that U.S. political support for the mission will endure for a considerable period. The year 2009 is likely to be bloody as the additional U.S. forces establish themselves in the country. Will the additional troops, however, bring about a turning point in the war? In other words, will the extra forces enable the United States and its

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allies to cap the violence and also to focus more on the development of the security sector of Afghanistan and the political reconciliation process?

Afghanistan Today

According to data collected by Brookings colleagues Jason Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, the security environment in Afghanistan is continuously deteriorating. Civilian fatalities have doubled since 2006, after having increased by a considerable fraction from 2002–2003, as have U.S. fatality rates. Fatalities among Afghan security forces are now well over 1,000 a year. Total foreign force losses since 2001 now exceed 1,000 in aggregate (with British and Canadian forces now having each lost more than 100 troops, and the United States over 600).

The situation in Afghanistan has been fairly bad, but future prospects are reasonably good.

Afghan security forces have grown very slowly and remain badly undersized: they numbered just 6,000 soldiers in 2003, increasing to about 25,000 through 2005, and then going up to 36,000 in 2006, 50,000 in 2007, and 58,000 in 2008. Police and border security forces have followed a similar trajectory. Only 30 percent of the army and just 3 percent of existing police forces rank in the top two tiers of combat readiness. Kidnappings remain rampant, and roads are increasingly unsafe for foreigners as well as Afghans themselves, with the Taliban increasingly able to disrupt normal commerce and movement, especially at night. And, the acreage of Afghanistan's farmland devoted to opium production has roughly doubled in the last few years.[2]

Not all trends are bad. Large numbers of refugees—about five million out of eight million total—have come home since 2001. About half of Afghanistan's children are now in school, including dramatically increased numbers of girls relative to the Taliban years. Child immunizations are up to around 70 percent levels. Child mortality has declined somewhat, from about 165 deaths for every 1,000 individuals aged five or less early in this decade to 130 per 1,000 in 2008. Telephone use has skyrocketed and more than five million people now have phones. Inflation is in check at about 10 percent a year, and real gross domestic product (GDP) growth has also been averaging 10 percent. Several qualitative trends are worth noting as well. For instance, Kandahar City, the heart of Taliban country, despite having suffered far too many assassinations and other forms of violence, has a great deal of visible life on the streets. The Afghan police are also performing reasonably well there. They feature units that have

received the most rigorous training to date, through what is known as the focused district development program.

Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest countries, with very few resources and limited human capital. As a result, Afghans have modest expectations about their country, and will likely be encouraged by even relatively modest amounts of progress in their lives. Because perceptions matter so much in counterinsurgency operations, this reality could be quite important and advantageous. It helps explain why Afghans, though less supportive of the United States than they were five or even three years ago, remain optimistic (saying by a ratio of 54 to 24 in the last available poll of 2008 that the country was still headed in the right direction).[3] That may bode well for the presidential elections expected in 2009. It is likely that most Afghans will cherish their chance to participate again in their country's democratic experiment.

Despite the deterioration of Afghanistan's security situation, it remains less violent than many strife-torn lands. Afghanistan's estimated *yearly* civilian war tolls of some 2,000 deaths, even if understating actual totals by a factor of two, are comparable to the *monthly* losses from violence in Iraq in the civil war period. Civil wars in central and west Africa, and elsewhere, have also had much higher death rates in recent years. Numerous countries with serious crime problems, such as Columbia, Mexico, Russia, and South Africa, have much higher per capita death tolls from violence than does Afghanistan.[4]

Rationale for Elements of the 2009 Strategy

While recognizing that such statistics are imprecise, it is nevertheless still safe to say that the situation in Afghanistan is bleak, and that a new approach was needed as 2009 began.

The Rationale for Much Larger Force

The essence of NATO and Afghan strategy for 2009 is to increase the size of available security forces of all major types. This will not be a sufficient policy change, but it does appear quite necessary and entirely appropriate at this juncture. Western troop totals in Afghanistan are just over 60,000, while Afghan security forces number some 140,000 including soldiers and police. In other words, 200,000 personnel are trying to accomplish what 700,000 soldiers and police (plus 100,000 "volunteers") are doing in the slightly smaller and less populous nation of Iraq. Using excessive airpower as a rapid-reaction tool has been a direct result of the relatively small troop numbers. Though airpower has its benefits, it has created problems with civilian casualties in cases of mistaken identity because insurgents are able to immerse themselves among the population more easily in the larger and more populous Afghanistan than in Iraq. Standard counterinsurgency guidelines recommend 20 police and/or soldiers for every 1,000 civilians, implying that

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Afghanistan should have some 600,000 total security forces, at least in rough numbers. The complexities of Afghanistan, including the drug trade and the sanctuary available to many insurgents in Pakistan, do not change this calculus; if anything they reinforce it.

President Barack Obama has promised an increase in U.S. forces for Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) Gen. David Petraeus, and Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Gen. David D. McKiernan are talking about adding some 25,000 more U.S. troops. This promise includes an increase from two to six U.S. brigade combat teams over the next year or so, which will bring U.S. force totals to nearly 60,000 and total international troop totals to about 90,000. Gates finally reached a decision late in the summer of 2008 to help the Afghans double the size of their army, a policy that will bring their own total security forces to more than 200,000. This will take combined Afghan and international capabilities to 300,000—an improvement, but still less than half of what is probably necessary.

Applying "Clear, Hold, and Build" to Afghanistan

Of course, it is not just a question of how many troops will be in Afghanistan, but what they will do. According to initial plans, the added forces would be used to secure major highways in the country, expand coverage of populated regions, attempt to reduce the flow of insurgents into the country from Pakistan to the extent possible, and perhaps most of all, train the Afghan military and police forces.

Many of the concepts guiding employment of NATO and Afghan forces are now following solid counterinsurgency and stabilization doctrines. For example, the strategy for securing the country is following the concept of "clear, hold and build." Until now, NATO forces had often moved into populated areas to pursue insurgents, and then would pull out once a given search and destroy operation was complete. The Taliban would then return and would kill or intimidate the friendly Afghans who would never help the foreign forces again. This approach does not work, as the U.S. forces also learned during the first four years of Iraq. Today, Afghan and NATO security forces move into new regions only when forces are available to hold onto them thereafter. Training of soldiers and police has also become much more serious. These programs are not only longer and tougher, but training teams are being embedded into units after they complete training.

Furthermore, as Afghan security forces improve, and create greater bonds of trust with the population, intelligence is improving. In Kandahar City, for example, citizens are identifying up to 80 percent of all improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to authorities before they go off, suggesting the population may be our ally. NATO leadership is encouraging the Karzai government to reform its key institutions and replace military as well as police commanders who fail to do their jobs. The ministers of defense and the interior are both well regarded by the international community. Economic development funds are being quickly deployed at the local level as military operations are concluded, or when Afghan authorities make other needed reforms. Such funds create jobs as well as a visible sense of rapid progress. British and Canadian experts, many of them civilians, are among the leaders in these efforts.

Future Policy Choices

Despite these promising plans, there are several problems plaguing the mission. The overall development strategy is poorly constructed. It consists of too many donors and the Afghan government is too weak to organize them all, resulting in a weak economy that fails to provide viable alternatives to the narcotics business. In addition, constant internal bickering and maneuvering within the Karzai government, including capricious firing of some promising officials by the office of the president of late, such as the governor of Kandahar in early December, has further complicated matters. And even though the United States will increase the number of troops, they will remain inadequate, which leaves the population insecure and top officials vulnerable to assassination attempts.

Perhaps an insufficient political reconciliation process that fails to include various elements of the insurgency has only fueled instability in the country. There is no doubt that the political reconciliation process plays a key role in securing and stabilizing the Afghan government. Recommendations on how the process can be strengthened to meet this goal follow.

The Size and Shape of the Afghan Army and Police

As noted, even with planned increases, combined coalition and Afghan forces will remain less than half of what they were in Iraq. Planned troop increases may be adequate to beef up training capabilities, protect the few main roads, and carry out several other discrete functions, but they will probably not be adequate to seriously disrupt flows of foreign fighters across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border or to ensure population security in all of Afghanistan's major cities and towns. It is doubtful that the international community can deploy more than the planned 90,000 troops to Afghanistan in 2009. Apart from constraints on available western troops, Afghanistan's infrastructure also limits the rate of troop buildup. Things could change modestly after 2010, but probably not very much.

That leaves a further increase in the size of Afghan army and police forces as the key policy option. The core reason behind the currently small aggregate security forces in Afghanistan, and why they are likely to remain relatively small—even with the planned buildup to 134,000 Afghan soldiers as well as some 80,000 police—is because of a conscious decision by Western states to keep them that way. Afghan politics has played a minor role, but much of the rationale has been due to Afghanistan's purported inability to fund a large force. Afghanistan's GDP is only $11 billion and its annual federal budget is just $4 billion, and more than half of this comes from foreign aid. It clearly cannot sustain a large army and police, so why build a large Afghan security force? The answer is simple: because the alternatives are worse, so policymakers have to find a way to make it sustainable.

One way is to increase the number of NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan, pushing the combined cost of the operation well above the current $4 billion a month. For its part, the United States has been spending nearly $3 billion a year to fund the Afghanistan security forces of late. This is a great deal of money, but far less than the $4 billion a month in direct U.S. military costs in that country. The United States should be willing to double that $3 billion a year if necessary for the next few years.

Many scholars ask whether the U.S. political system is reliable enough to commit such funds to an enlarged Afghan security force over an extended period. The answer is quite likely yes. The United States has proven as much over the years in funding Egypt, Greece, Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey when core U.S. security interests dictated it. Certainly Afghanistan, where al Qaeda once had its main home and where Afghans themselves are not yet ready to lead, is worth a comparable financial investment.

To be sure, helping the Afghanistan government recruit, vet, train, and equip a total of 300,000 to 400,000 security forces will take time as well as money. Only some 40 percent of necessary NATO and U.S. trainers are in place even for the current scale of effort. For example, only about 3,000 Afghan police have been getting intensive training per year as a result. Larger numbers go through police academy training on an individual basis, but that is not sufficient. Taking entire police units to more intensive regimens is becoming necessary. Doubling training efforts will take a new infusion of resources, including perhaps the transformation of some U.S. combat brigades into what retired Army Colonel John Nagl describes as an army adviser corps.

Security Cooperation with Local Actors

Much recent discussion has focused on whether parts of the insurgency can be convinced not to fight any longer. It is very unlikely that accommodation can be reached with the likes of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and other brutal warlords or

with Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Most experts like Minister Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai of the Afghan government focus instead on the grassroots level. They ask whether lower-level Taliban or other types of less committed insurgents, many of whom may be motivated more by money than ideology, can be talked into joining the political process.

> The overall development strategy is still poorly constructed.

The Afghan government is making some efforts along these lines through the so-called Social Outreach Program and the Independent Directorate of Local Government. These initiatives help district-wide communities, consisting typically of many small towns and villages, to organize and provide them with funds for development if they do so successfully. A related aspect of this question is the degree to which militias, tribes, and other nongovernmental entities might be convinced to cooperate with the government in providing security. One pilot program organized by ISAF and the Afghan government may soon work with several of them in Wardak province, provided they convene a *shura* and elect a council, create a security group to conduct local patrolling, and allow supervision by the Afghan Army or NATO. They may wind up being paid but not armed.

Two types of cooperation with local actors are already happening today. The first deals with the UN World Food Program (WFP), which contacts local communities to request protection for food deliveries to remote regions. If the communities ensure the food's safety and equitable distribution in their regions, WFP will make the deliveries; otherwise it will not. A major cell phone company in Afghanistan similarly has chosen to pay communities to provide security for its towers rather than hire armed guards, at least in certain rural areas. This arrangement seems to be working.

In the second type, a country pays a local company to provide security. Currently, the Canadians are paying a private Afghan company to help with security around the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). They emphasize, however, that this is a credentialed company, and not a militia. As a result of the contract, attacks on the base have declined dramatically over the last year and a half. These relatively happy and promising anecdotes, however, are balanced out by at least one unsettling recent story. A militia in Kandahar with which the Afghan government has reached an understanding apparently operates in the very part of Kandahar province (west of the city) where several Canadian soldiers were killed in early December by two huge IEDs. The contract, therefore, did not accomplish its objectives, at least with respect to these cases. Arming Afghan militias would probably be taking this process too far. But expanding the above types of efforts makes eminent sense and should be

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pursued where possible, provided that the performance of the informal groups can be monitored and proves adequate.

In short, in addition to improving security directly through reinforcements from the United States, NATO and U.S. strategy for 2009 has several promising elements. First, the focus is now on proper implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine, such as "clear, hold, build," with areas being reclaimed only after combined Afghan/NATO forces have the capacity to hold on to the liberated areas thereafter. Second, increased U.S. troops will allow proper training of Afghan forces for the first time, including embedding of advisors after basic training. And third, serious, sophisticated, and systematic attention is now being given to the challenge of how to approach the reconciliation process.

Conclusion

As former Afghan finance minister Ashraf Ghani emphasized in December, Afghans are not a people stuck in the sixteenth century, hopelessly destined to feud among themselves and act xenophobically toward the outside world. They are a young people, and they are more interested in the future than the past.[5] No one is envisioning a wealthy state or a model democracy. In the short run it would be enough that Afghanistan improve security, remain on its gradual path of economic growth and human development, and reach a point where these positive trajectories can continue without huge outside help.

Much can still derail the United States and the international community from this objective. The police may prove simply too corrupt. The sanctuary for Taliban and militia fighters in Pakistan may prove too impregnable and otherwise resilient to efforts to stanch its effects on the conflict in Afghanistan. Critical government reformers may wind up in personality-driven disputes with Karzai (or his successor, if a new president is elected in 2009) and be fired. Or some may be assassinated, depriving the country of much needed leadership. With sustained attention and resources, however, the international community in partnership with Afghan patriots and reformers has a good chance to make important progress in this important war and nation-building enterprise.

Notes

1. Such trips can be very informative. They allow concentrated study, access to a wide range of officials, and the opportunity to speak candidly with many people, some of whom are known to the visitors, facilitating frank discussions. This approach provides a combination of hard data, qualitative information, unvarnished opinions of what is happening on the ground and opportunity for visitors to probe and question.
2. Jason H. Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington D.C.: Brookings, December 16, 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/foreign-policy/~/media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf.
3. Brookings Institution, "Afghanistan Index," http://www.brookings.edu/foreign-policy/afghanistan-index.aspx.
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5. Philip Gordon et al., "Memo to the President: Expand the Agenda in Pakistan and Afghanistan" (panel discussion, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., December 18, 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/events/2008/1218_transition/20081218_afghanistan_pakistan.pdf.