



Improving Afghanistan Policy

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Recent weeks have brought yet more troubling news from Afghanistan. The Taliban killed 35 civilians near Kandahar Air Base on December 9, then struck again in Kabul causing Spanish and Afghan losses, and then killed six Americans on patrol near Bagram Air Base on December 21. Taliban forces have made considerable inroads in Helmand province, important for its history and its role in opium production (which enriches the Taliban) and its proximity to the Taliban's historic capital of Kandahar. President Ashraf Ghani went to Pakistan in mid-December in the hope that Islamabad would rein in the Taliban, but instead all he got was the resignation of his top intelligence officer, who felt that Ghani was becoming a supplicant to the enemy. All this happened even as ISIL has been establishing a foothold in the country, adding to the witches' brew of extremist groups already there. Given such a backdrop, some Americans may wonder why President Barack Obama recently decided to retain a significant U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan of 5,500 GI troops to hand off to his successor, rather than to cut his losses and leave (as had been previously planned).

In fact, Obama is right to keep at it. Afghanistan remains very important to American security, largely because of the presence of those very groups that are causing the mayhem. Indeed, another "highlight" of the fall season was a major raid conducted against a substantial al Qaeda site in the vicinity of Kandahar. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and over the border in Pakistan, remains a serious threat to western security and can only be directly and effectively addressed to the extent that the United States retains substantial military and

intelligence assets in the vicinity, as was witnessed in the fall raids.

For all the discouraging news of late, however, the situation in Afghanistan is far from hopeless. For each negative trend, there is an important counterargument. Rather than throw up our collective arms in frustration, the United States should instead reinvigorate its effort in Afghanistan—not at the level of earlier years, but modestly more than is the case right now. The United States should also think creatively about how Pakistan might be induced to be more cooperative in the Afghanistan project. But that is a big and partly separate issue that I will address only in passing here. Frustrations with Islamabad, while indeed a serious problem, should not discourage us from believing that Afghanistan can be held together and gradually stabilized even under current conditions.

THE YIN AND THE YANG OF AFGHANISTAN TODAY

Before getting to policy recommendations, it is useful to review the overall situation in Afghanistan today. Doing so is sobering, of course, but it also helps deflate the case for despair, and reinforce the case for strategic patience.

- ▶ To be sure, the security situation in Afghanistan is bad. Yet it is hardly catastrophic. The UN estimates that war is causing about 10,000 casualties a year at present, of which perhaps 3,000

are deaths—higher than at any time records have been kept this century. Statistically at least, however, that is still a lower death rate from violence than countries supposedly at peace, like South Africa, or countries that have come to be seen as success stories like Colombia. Cities still bustle; markets and schools are still open; the population is not cowering in fear in most of the country.¹

- ▶ Afghan security forces let Kunduz fall to the enemy this past autumn, but then they retook the city within a couple weeks. Similarly, they stopped the December Taliban attack on the Kandahar airfield, even if not before 35 civilians lost their lives. They also repulsed coordinated Taliban probes against a number of other regional centers in the immediate aftermath of the Kunduz disaster. Earlier in the year, moreover, the Afghan army planned and conducted three major operations essentially on its own, two of them involving multiple corps (each corps is about 25,000 strong, and each has specific geographic responsibilities). The Taliban remain resilient, and have gained some net holdings this year—but probably not more than 3 to 5 percent of the country as measured by affected population.
- ▶ Nepotism and corruption still exist within the military and police. But President Ghani, working with Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, has retired some 70 senior military officers this year in an effort to improve the quality of leadership. NATO is now working hard under Ghani's guidance to rebuild the 215th Corps in Helmand Province, which performed the worst of the Afghan Army's six major corps structures over the past fighting season. The kandak (about 800 soldiers) around Kunduz is also being rehabilitated.

- ▶ The coalition government of Ghani and Abdullah, inaugurated in September of 2014 after a major election controversy, consumed half a year in quarrels over formation of a cabinet and other such disputes. Preparations for overdue parliamentary elections are also way behind schedule. But Ghani and Abdullah have held together, and gradually sorted out many of their differences, without a catastrophic meltdown of the central government. That pattern is likely to continue, as Abdullah predicted to me during a recent conversation. Does anybody think that George W. Bush and Al Gore, or John McCain and Barack Obama, would have done better if they had somehow been obliged to create a government of national unity after a disputed election? Ghani and Abdullah have also greatly tightened oversight in the awarding of government contracts as part of an anticorruption strategy.

The Afghan people are worried but not desperate. In a recent Asia Foundation survey, they expressed more concern about the country's future than at any other time in the last decade, with only 37 percent expressing optimism (down starkly from 54 percent in 2014, when elections and the presidential transition process were taking place). However, a substantial majority—75 percent, essentially unchanged from the recent past—expressed contentment and happiness with their lives despite it all. That is partly a reflection of some of the wonderful, positive attributes that many of us lucky enough to travel to this country have come to appreciate about Afghans. It also may reflect their view that, as bad as things are, the nation is not on the verge of collapse. While two-thirds say the security situation is not good, more than two-thirds express confidence in their nation's army and police.²

¹ See Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Washington, D.C., December 2015, pp. 17-22, available at http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225_Report_Dec_2015_-_Final_20151210.pdf, for these and other trends in the security situation. See also, Ian Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, "The Afghanistan Index," December 2015, available at www.brookings.edu/afghanistanindex.

² The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People," San Francisco, 2015, pp. 5-13, available at www.asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Afghanistan2015.pdf.

Some of the contradictions are of America's own making, by the way. For example, the U.S. military is allowed to fight al Qaeda and use force in its own defense. But Washington does not permit it to fight the Taliban—or even ISIL at present, unless directly attacked. Afghans may be forgiven for wondering why the United States seems only halfway in this fight, even though there are still 10,000 Americans in uniform there. It is one thing to wean Afghan forces off dependence on NATO troops, something else to create rules of engagement that often appear arbitrary.

Thankfully, there is now one fewer contradiction or uncertainty in Afghanistan—the future role of the United States, and thus of the coalition of roughly 50 countries, militaries and donors, that continues to operate there.³ Previously Obama called this conflict “a war of necessity.” Yet he seemed willing to pull the plug on it to satisfy a U.S. political calendar. Now, he has pledged to keep an American force in country throughout his term, and most of his plausible successors would likely sustain the commitment. Unlike President Karzai, the Ghani/Abdullah leadership team in Kabul has welcomed the foreign help.

On the question of numbers for 2017 and beyond, the United States and NATO in general will retain assets for intelligence, commando raids against certain types of targets, central training of Afghan forces, and limited air operations. U.S. forces will be based at five major operating locations in the east and south of the country, plus a half dozen more sites in and around Kabul; European militaries will concentrate in the nation's north and west. But in order to comply with President Obama's ceiling of 5,500 American troops come 2017, NATO will have to pull advisors out of the forward headquarters of the Army's main field-level assets—the 201st, 203rd, 205th, 207th, 209th, and 215th corps. In fact, as recent challenges from Kunduz to Helmand to the

nation's east attest, unexpected crises can erupt with little warning. The corps in Helmand province and the kandak (or battalion) near Kunduz that experienced some of the greatest setbacks in 2015 were not benefiting from advising, mentoring, and partnering at the time of their most severe problems. Perhaps NATO had already downsized too much even to maintain a consistent presence at the corps level. That defect has been temporarily remedied, and NATO is working to help Afghans rebuild the 215th corps in Helmand, but by 2017, it will no longer have adequate forces to carry out such efforts.

THE PATH AHEAD: SECURITY

Thus, for all his commendable resolve, Obama is still making mistakes in his Afghan policy. He is trying so hard to minimize the U.S. role and wean Afghans from international help that he runs unnecessary risks of losing the war in the short term. None of Obama's thinking is reckless, but it pushes too far and too fast for an Afghan people and government who are still making several huge transitions, in political and economic as well as security terms, that leave their situation very fraught and fragile. In particular, the United States should make two changes to its security plans as promptly as possible—and if President Obama does not make them, his successor should:

- ▶ The United States should allow U.S. and NATO airpower to target ISIL and the Taliban. In recent years, and especially since the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan changed from the International Security Assistance Force to Resolute Support last December, Washington has restricted its use of combat power to two purposes: targeting al Qaeda, and providing self-defense for our own troops. Sometimes in a pinch, the U.S. military has helped Afghan forces when they were in desperate straits,

³ As of December, 2015, there were 40 countries providing about 12,900 troops to the Resolute Support mission (and a modest number led by the United States also have separate forces devoted to counterterrorism, totaling another 3,000 or so). The top ten contributors to Resolute Support, after the United States with its 6,800 uniformed personnel, were Georgia (870), Germany (850), Italy (829), Romania (650), Turkey (508), the United Kingdom (470), the Czech Republic (232), Australia (229), and Poland (200). See Resolute Support Mission, “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Brussels, December 2015, available at http://www.nato.int/nato_static_f2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_12/20151210_2015-12-rsm-placemat.pdf.

as with the battle over Kunduz this past fall. But generally speaking, rules of engagement have been very narrowly construed in an effort to push the Afghan armed forces to defend their own territory, a seemingly reasonable proposition.

However, there are several problems with this approach. First, it is actually preventing us from attacking ISIL assets in Afghanistan today, unless specific individuals have already posed a direct threat to NATO. This is a nonsensical prohibition given what we know about ISIL's worldwide ambitions and activities, as well as its growing strength in Afghanistan.

Second, this approach impose unrealistically high demands on Afghan forces at this juncture in their development. They have already had to adjust to a 90 percent reduction in the strength of NATO troops over the last three years, even as the Taliban threat has remained resilient. Their air force remains at roughly half to two-thirds strength, in terms of pilots and airframes, according to the Pentagon's recent 1225 Report—due to a conscious decision by NATO several years ago, since the United States understandably desired to build up their army and police first and their air force subsequently. Progress is being made towards redressing existing gaps; in fact, Afghan air forces increased their pace of aerial attacks by more than 1,000 percent in 2015, relative to the year before. But it will take the rest of the decade to complete the job. Given these realities, Taliban forces have learned that they can mass in the field with relative impunity from overhead attack in many cases.

Third, there are unholy alliances, shifting memberships, and various pledges of allegiance linking key extremist groups in South Asia—al Qaeda and ISIL and the Taliban, as well as Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Pakistani Taliban (or TTP). Making too fine a distinction of which extremist groups our forces can attack within Afghanistan and which they cannot fails to recognize that at

least the above six are fairly united in common ideology and often in common purpose.

- ▶ The reduction to 5,500 U.S. troops will almost certainly be premature. Indeed, the U.S. force might better expand to 12,000 or so for a couple years (either way, American troops will be joined by up to several thousand more NATO forces from at least two dozen countries, as the alliance in general is showing remarkable patience with this prolonged mission).

More generally, Washington and Brussels should stop making an exit strategy their top priority in Afghanistan security policy. They should emphasize instead the importance of an enduring partnership between NATO and Afghanistan. Our counterterrorism goals support such an approach. And by taking a longer-term time horizon for planning, the U.S. and NATO can steady some nerves in Afghanistan itself, while also sending a message to the Taliban and others (including Pakistan) that NATO's resolve and patience are not weakening. This message can shape the incentives of various actors in various ways and thereby help the prospects of the broader mission. The next U.S. president should create a four-year plan for continuing the mission in Afghanistan and underscore that even after the four years, NATO forces would remain in the country, though perhaps at somewhat lower numbers than current levels.

In Washington, the debate over NATO troop numbers can seem arcane and abstract. In the field, it is a quite different matter. Obama's welcome decision to keep at least 5,500 troops into 2017 is very important because it allows the United States to keep operational combat bases in Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Jalalabad, and Bagram near Kabul—five different key hubs, all important for monitoring and tackling different parts of the extremist challenge.

But 5,500 troops is not enough to work with fielded Afghan forces. At present, NATO advises most of the half dozen Afghan army corps—the

highest echelon of deployed combat capability that actually makes plans and conducts operations. However, already in 2015, NATO found that it did not have quite enough forces to mentor all six continuously, so it skimped on helping with the 215th Corps in Helmand Province—and partly as a result, that area experienced the greatest challenges and setbacks of any part of the country. Resolute Support command has reconfigured its assets; U.S. advisors are now working hard with Afghan partners to try to make amends and rebuild the 215th for the year ahead.

Fortunately, Obama’s timetable for downsizing forces will allow most of ongoing mentoring relationships to continue through 2016 and another fighting season. Given the Taliban threat, that is crucially important militarily. It is also important politically. It could help buy time for President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah as well as other Afghan political leaders to get through what is expected to be another tough transition year on the political front, as parliamentary elections are overdue and the two-year temporary powersharing arrangement that Ghani and Abdullah fashioned with Secretary Kerry’s help in 2014 is due to expire in the fall.

But there are problems. One more year of mentoring the Afghan Army corps formations is not likely to be enough. In addition, the United States should be partnering and mentoring not only at the corps level, but even with some deployed Afghan brigades and perhaps even some battalions (or “kandaks”) as well—those performing worst and those facing the greatest challenges. This does NOT mean reintroducing American ground forces into the main fight in Afghanistan. But it does recognize that for a military that is still early in the process of making post-Karzai reforms, and still facing a tough foe, more time is needed on the long, slow road to self-sufficiency.

Over the course of his or her first term, the next U.S. president should be able to get back on the gradual path towards downsizing American

troops in Afghanistan. But in the short term, further cuts now risk losing a war that, while far from hopeless, is still too close to call, and still very important to American security.

THE PATH AHEAD: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POLICIES

As noted, a longer-term time horizon could help reassure allies and weaken the resolve of enemies in Afghanistan. Indeed, I would advocate taking a longer perspective on political and economic matters as well as on security policy and troop levels.

In my recent conversations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, I have been struck that the international community has no discernible long-term economic or political goals. It lacks big ideas or the civilian equivalent of a “campaign plan” for what its various efforts are seeking to achieve. Political and diplomatic efforts are focused on managing immediate crises, of which there is no shortage.

In economic terms, international efforts tend to focus on getting donors to commit certain sums of money at the macro level, helping Afghanistan survive current economic setbacks, and completing individual projects run by specific donors while gradually building up Afghan ministerial capacity. I have seen little longer-term thinking about issues such as these:

- ▶ Should Afghanistan have an integrated and achievable medium-term agricultural development plan?
- ▶ How should specific plans for roads, dams, electrification, and other infrastructure support the above agricultural plan as well as other economic objectives?
- ▶ What can be done about land reform?

Perhaps even more stark than the lack of economic planning is the absence of a political strategy for Afghanistan. To be fair, diplomats have a lot on their plate already. Issues include helping Afghans decide when to hold parliamentary elections, how

to reform the Independent Election Commission, and how to modify or extent the current Ghani-Abdullah powersharing arrangement which is due to expire in the fall of 2016. But too often, when the subject of bigger strategy comes up, the conversation devolves quickly into ways of advancing peace talks with the Taliban while gaining Pakistan's support in the process. Such ideas are important, but they should be seen as derivative of a more foundational political strategy that focuses first and foremost on Afghan institutions and the health of its democracy.

Today, the implicit political strategy for Afghanistan, such as it is, places too much faith narrowly in the ballot box and specifically in the top one or two politicians in the country. Elections do not, of course, automatically produce stable constitutional democracies. Examples from Algeria in the early 1990s to Iraq in 2005 to the Palestinian Authority in 2006 should remind us that stable constitutional democracies require strong institutions, functioning courts, systems of checks and balances, political movements or parties that do not exacerbate a state's internal conflicts, and the gradual establishment of a tradition of peaceful resolution of disputes.⁴ Afghanistan cannot and will not gain all of these attributes of a mature democracy anytime soon. But the subjects cannot be ignored, either.

Consider first the branch of Afghan government that is often overlooked or treated as an afterthought: the parliament. At least two major reforms in parliament would seem sensible under the current circumstances. One would strengthen the body's ability to devise and assess new policies, including legislation. At present the parliament, notably the lower house or Wolesi Jirga, is essentially a rubber stamp organization. It can say no to legislation and budgets proposed by the government, or it can say yes, but it generally cannot initiate or modify changes to the law. Whether or not it is realistic to allow parliament to take primary control of the budget, it should probably have greater legislative

prerogatives on other matters. This may require constitutional change, given how the Afghan constitution places most power to propose legislation in the executive branch of government. But it might be done through new understandings rather than formal amendment, as I first argued in 2011 with Gretchen Birkle and Hassina Sherjan. For example, perhaps the executive branch could agree that a bill that came out of a parliamentary committee with strong support exceeding a certain threshold would be automatically forwarded through the executive back to parliament for further consideration and a final vote, once the government had a chance to comment on it and propose changes.

A second worthwhile change would be to strengthen parliament's technical ability to consider changes to policy. In the United States, for example, in the aftermath of the Vietnam and Watergate era, Congress created several research organizations, independent of party, designed to provide the body more intellectual muscle in such matters. Once that effort was complete, Congress had four institutions—the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and the now-defunct Office of Technology Assessment—to help in that endeavor. Afghanistan does not need and cannot afford three or four such bodies. But some type of an Afghan Parliamentary Research Service, staffed with at least several dozens of researchers in various fields and headed by a technocrat whose term does not coincide with those of members or the president, might usefully strengthen the role of parliament in Afghanistan. Most of its formal publications could also be available to the public, given parliament's role as representative of the people.

Even more central an issue is the question of political parties in Afghanistan. Under current procedures, candidates for office in Afghanistan generally do not run under the aegis of political parties. This is due to President Karzai's argument, in a view shared by numerous other Afghans as well, that political

⁴ On this and some other ideas below, see Gretchen Birkle, Michael O'Hanlon, and Hassina Sherjan, "Towards a Political Strategy for Afghanistan," Foreign Policy Paper No. 27, Brookings Institution, May 2011, available at http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/papers/2011/5/afghanistan-ohanlon/05_afghanistan_ohanlon.pdf.

parties conjure up memories of communist rule in the country's past and therefore work against the national interest and national unity. There has also been concern that, especially in the years immediately following the overthrow of the Taliban, political parties might empower ethnic actors or warlords more than reformists, technocrats, or individuals with a national agenda.⁵ This was particularly worrisome since, in the early years of post-Taliban rule, the United States also inadvertently helped strengthen many warlords and other similar actors, making it even harder for others to challenge their organizations and syndicates.⁶ Parties are not actually banned in Afghanistan. In fact, they are explicitly allowed in the Afghan constitution, provided that they are not ethnic or tribal in agenda or membership. But existing law and procedures make it hard for most candidates for office from identifying themselves as members of parties when seeking election.⁷ As a result of this policy, many foreign advisory groups stay away from party politics to a large extent. They often focus more of their very worthwhile activities on citizen education, on helping Afghans organize for issue-based advocacy, and on media and public education activities rather than on party building.

The current single non-transferrable vote for parliament, in which top vote-getters in a province win election, may need to be reconsidered in favor of stronger roles for parties—and thus, of big ideas and policy proposals rather than personalities and patronage networks as is typically the case today. In order to reduce the dangers that parties will fan the flames of sectarianism, any party seeking to gain seats in parliament through the proportional vote should have to achieve at least a modest level of electoral support nationwide.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Afghanistan today is deeply troubled and fraught. But it is not measurably worse than

one might have expected say back in 2012, when the Taliban resistance had already proven itself resilient in the face of a NATO troop surge, and when big elections loomed in Afghanistan as President Karzai's second term in office neared its end. Compared with that benchmark, and in light of the fact that NATO has withdrawn 125,000 of the world's best soldiers over the last three years, some deterioration was to be expected. The resulting circumstances today are hardly cause for despondency.

Moreover, given the new leadership in Kabul, looming presidential elections in the United States, and President Obama's recent decision to extend a substantial U.S. military presence in Afghanistan after 2016, new possibilities loom. There is now the opportunity to take a brand-new approach with new leadership in both Afghanistan and the West. We can break the cycle of yearly approaches to the brink of the policymaking cliff, and work with Kabul to create a longer time horizon for security, political, and economic reforms. The Warsaw and Lisbon summits in the summer and fall of 2016 cannot resolve such matters, before the U.S. presidential race, but they can move along the debates.

Of course, Afghans themselves must make the big decisions that lie before that country. But the international community should use its influence concertedly. The United States and its partners are still providing huge amounts of resources to the country, giving them leverage and also moral authority. And a time when they have already scaled back their collective troop presence by 90 percent and costs in Afghanistan by at least 80 percent, the burden of the mission has become sustainable. In light of the continued extremist threat in South Asia, and thus the continued importance of Afghanistan to western security, it is a burden that the United States can afford to bear given the credible alternatives.

⁵ See for example, Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), pp. 18-20.

⁶ See Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 168-170, 227-228.

⁷ See article 35 in Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Constitution of Afghanistan," Kabul, Afghanistan, ratified January 26, 2004, available at <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/constitution.html> [accessed March 23, 2011].

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