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AFGHANISTAN: When the War is Unwinnable

Greg Mills

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As the West place more troops in Afghanistan, there are lessons to be learned from history. Avoid making the same mistakes that others made in the past, for otherwise the war will not be won.

WESTERN GOVERNMENTS are pouring more troops into Afghanistan. But this strategy is doomed to fail unless they can master the far harder tasks of counter-insurgency, state-building and development. Winning the Afghan war is about politics, people and jobs.

Although the success of the surge in Iraq and the recent military victory by Sri Lankan government forces over the Tamil Tigers may have emboldened those favouring the military as the principal providers of stability, this is a chimera. In Afghanistan this approach will create at least as many problems as it might solve.

Two Afghanistans

According to conventional wisdom the principal problem is that the footprint of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan is too small to secure a vast, mountainous and inaccessible terrain. Whereas Western forces in Kosovo blanketed that micro-state at a ratio of one soldier per 0.3km², the ISAF ratio has been around 50 times less. Being 'troop-light' supposedly results in a balloon-effect: as ISAF pushes in one area, the Taliban squeezes out to somewhere safer which ISAF cannot simultaneously cover.

But this argument presupposes that the fresh increase of 22,000 troops will be enough to fill the harsh ungoverned spaces especially of south and eastern Afghanistan. It presumes that the Taliban are not spoiling for a fight. More importantly, that the surge will be useful in supporting a political solution accepted by the bulk of Afghans.

While President Hamid Karzai has proven an instantly sartorially recognisable if not entirely popular figure in the West, he has been underwhelming in leading his fractious country to peace. This is partly because of his own inadequacies, his absence of vision and delivery, the corruption allegations which

taint his family, and partly because he was, whatever the subsequent electoral niceties and his attempts to put distance between himself and his foreign benefactors, initially elevated by outsiders. And if only one homily is true about Afghanistan, it's that foreigners have historically a limited welcome and grace period to get things done.

But Karzai's weakness also relate to the fissures in Afghan society, and to the failings of Western approaches. There are two Afghanistans. The Afghanistan of those who believe in the possibility of a peaceful and prosperous multi-ethnic society, a progressive extension of the cosmopolitan Kabul the city's elite once experienced, the type of Afghan that earnest Westerners talk to and prefer to hear. Then there is the Afghanistan of a hard-scrabble, prosaic existence in the country-side, where tribalism pervades and law and order is defined less by the law than the Koran, chauvinism, deterrence and retribution.

Karzai has not bridged the gap between the two Afghanistans. And the surge alone will not enable him to do so.

Until now the West's development efforts have foundered because its methods do not intersect those of Afghan power groups. For example, are attempts to open up the economy and stimulate growth in the best interests of those who prefer to keep power close to their chests? Put differently, where the plans of outsiders are linear in their intent and actions, Afghans are deliberately vague, non-committal and apparently unhelpful and thankless.

This creates a dilemma for the West. Walking away is not an option. If nothing else, 9/11 illustrated the costs of complacency, just as Iraq demonstrated the folly of rationale invention. Doing nothing and allowing Afghanistan to fester, and likely fall apart violently is not in anyone's interests.

The Lessons of Afghanistan

So what to do?

The first lesson: do not give the insurgents what they want. The Afghan war is an instance of asymmetric means (where one side uses its weakness to military advantage). It is also, more profoundly, a war of asymmetric ends (where both sides do not want the same thing). The presumption that both sides in Afghanistan want the fighting to end may well turn out to be foolish. Instead, cultural differences in the attitude towards war as a way of life favour a long war.

Second, in each and every country example, the process of recovery from conflict to stability involves the same formula: Jobs, a stake in the system, political accommodation, security, stability, education, long-term investments in public goods, and so on. All of these aspects are part of a virtuous (or, if they are not attended to, vicious) cycle. In Afghanistan economic differences mirror the attitudinal divide, and make reforms more treacherous. Alienation over access to wealth coupled with historical enmities is a volatile mix, where access to income and jobs is determined by sub-national allegiances and connections.

Stability thus rests on understanding what sort of job-producing economy is possible in Afghanistan and, as the border cuts between one people, Pakistan.

Third, accept the way local systems operate. Local solutions, including political choices, need not only to be respected but encouraged. This means avoiding a design and dogma that will 'show' the locals how things should be done. The Western concept of tolerant multiculturalism might chime with the worldview of a Kabul elite, but may be meaningless or threatening to many others. Always the West should not set too many operating guidelines, but rather a few clear 'red lines' over which Afghans should not transgress, such as attacking coalition forces, giving Kabul the space necessary to

pursue nation- and state-building.

Rather than focusing on perfecting its tactical responses, the West has to be less linear and more strategic in building the alliances necessary to achieve the goal which is increasingly lost in the contemporary lexicon about 'stability', 'comprehensive approaches', 'peacebuilding' and 'development': Ensuring Afghanistan is not used as a base for terrorism.

Finally, in the same vein, the West should not try to do everything at once. It does not have to fill all 'ungoverned spaces'. It should be willing to let some areas 'go' while concentrating on those things and places it prefers, picking the fights where it and not the Taliban chooses. Only then might the war in Afghanistan be winnable.

Greg Mills heads the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation, an institutional partner of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He served in 2006 as an adviser to the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and head of his Prism analysis cell based in Kabul. He is currently a visiting scholar at Cambridge University.