



Scaling Back Expectations in Afghanistan

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The United States is expected to deploy 20,000 to 30,000 troops to Afghanistan over the coming year, roughly doubling the size of the force it already has in the country. The exact number will depend on the outcome of ongoing Afghanistan policy reviews taking place in the United States, and calculations of how many forces can be relocated from Iraq. But the Obama Administration obviously intends to make Afghanistan and the surrounding region a centrepiece of its foreign policy.

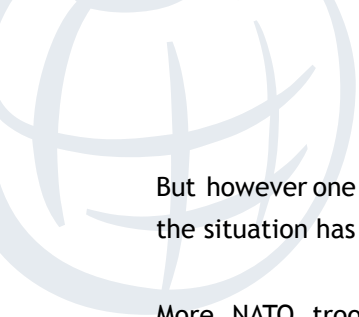
It is not a moment too soon. In fact, it might be a moment too late. There is a growing sentiment among watchers of this mission – and in policy circles in Washington and elsewhere – that the international operation in Afghanistan, in its current form, is failing.

Last October, a draft copy of a major US intelligence report found its way into the pages of the New York Times. It characterized the situation in Afghanistan as a “downward spiral,” with security conditions worsening, the insurgency growing stronger, and Afghans

At a glance...

- *The Obama Administration appears to be scaling back objectives and expectations for the international mission in Afghanistan, while simultaneously increasing its commitment of resources to the operation.*
- *The window of opportunity for expansive nation building in Afghanistan has closed. Deteriorating security conditions and declining public support for the international mission require a more focused, modest set of goals.*
- *Canada should wait until the details of the new Administration's policy are known before making a final decision on post-2011 Canadian involvement in Afghanistan.*

losing confidence in their own government and president, Hamid Karzai. “Downward spiral” may not be the best metaphor for recent trends in Afghanistan. It implies an out of control, plunging descent. More accurately, conditions in that country have been steadily worsening since at least 2005.



But however one chooses to characterize this slippage, the situation has become urgent.

More NATO troops are certainly needed, but the deployment of additional forces will not, in itself, reverse the slide towards defeat. A new approach is needed to the mission – and it appears that the Obama Administration is preparing just that.

Early Signals from the New Administration

After years of being distracted by Iraq, US policymakers now appear to be seized with Afghanistan. Returning from a recent trip to the region, Vice President Joe Biden made no attempt to sugar-coat conditions in Afghanistan. “[T]he situation has deteriorated a great deal,” he told the CBS program, *Face the Nation*, on January 25. “The Taliban is in effective control of significant parts of the country they were not before... [W]e’ve inherited a real mess. We’re about to go in and try to essentially reclaim territory that’s been effectively lost...”

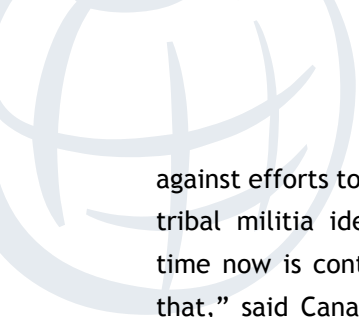
In addition to using new troops to reclaim lost territory, President Obama and his advisors have hinted at a new diplomatic initiative for the region – one that will engage Afghanistan and its surrounding countries, including Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran, on the premise that the conflict has important regional drivers and that any solution will require the help of neighboring countries – most notably, Pakistan. Tellingly, one of the new administration’s first announcements was the appointment of Richard Holbrooke, who brokered the Bosnian peace deal in the 1990s, to serve as President Obama’s new special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

More hints of imminent US policy change have emerged from other senior US officials, including General David Petraeus, now commander of all US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

Petraeus has been tipping his hand for weeks. Speaking at a public event in Washington just over two months ago, he suggested that negotiating with elements of the Taliban will be essential. In contrast to the Bush Administration’s tendency to label all Taliban as terrorists, Petraeus said: “I do think you’ve got to talk to [your] enemies” because that is the only way to figure out which members of the insurgency may be “reconcilable.” What remains unclear is how the Obama Administration’s apparent willingness to engage in discussions with elements of the Taliban (or other insurgents) will translate into concrete policy initiatives. As yet, there is no evidence that the Afghan government and its international backers have developed a consistent position on the types of insurgents to be engaged and under what conditions. Nor is there any evidence of widespread interest among insurgent groups in pursuing negotiations at a moment that they seem to have the upper hand.

Of course, Petraeus is the architect of the apparently successful “surge” strategy in Iraq, which involved not only additional US troops, but greater efforts to protect Iraqi civilians and the negotiation of deals with Sunni tribal groups to fight alongside American forces against foreign Al-Qaeda elements in Iraq. Not surprisingly, he has now called for a more “bottom up” approach in Afghanistan, too, focusing on building security in local communities while continuing to strengthen the national army and police.

However, talk of arming tribal militias in Afghanistan has sparked concerns from Afghans and other NATO countries, including the Canadian military. Afghans have not forgotten the nightmarish days of militia battles after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and before the Taliban’s conquest of most of the country in the mid-1990s – a time when much of the country’s urban infrastructure was destroyed. Arming local militias is also risky because it could exacerbate tensions within and between Afghan tribal communities in unpredictable ways, and because it might work



against efforts to build national security forces. “The tribal militia idea that has been around for some time now is controversial; we are not onboard with that,” said Canada’s Defence Minister Peter MacKay last December. “Our preference is to continue with this more formal training process that leads to a more reliable, more professional soldier and Afghan national security force.”

Since Mr. MacKay made those comments, however, the United States and the Afghan government have apparently agreed on a local constabulary approach that carefully avoids any reference to tribes or militias. In late January, Afghanistan’s new Interior Minister, Hanif Atmar, widely regarded as one of the most effective and honest members of the Karzai government, announced plans to create an Afghan Public Protection Force. He provided few details of the program, other than to insist that local groups will be armed with the same light weapons as the police, and that these new protection units will fall under “the leadership of the Afghan government.” He also declined to say where the program would be implemented first.

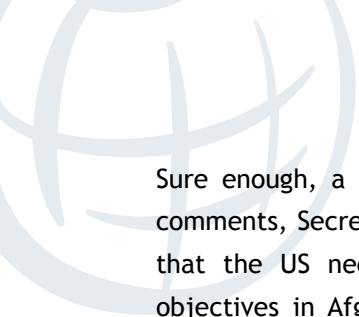
It is an open secret, however, that the first experiment under the program is taking place in Wardak province, right next to Kabul. Previously considered secure, Wardak has been infiltrated by insurgents, who have reportedly created shadow governance structures including roving Islamic courts. Travel on the major Kabul-Kandahar highway through Wardak and Lowgar provinces has become very dangerous. Not coincidentally, the first new US brigade to arrive in Afghanistan this year has been deployed in those provinces. The fact that it is necessary to shore up approaches to the capital is a sign of how urgent the situation has become.

At the same time, Washington may also be altering its relationship with President Karzai. After her nomination as Secretary of State, one of Hillary Clinton’s first comments echoed loudly in Kabul.

She described Afghanistan as a “narco-state” whose government is “plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption.” That kind of talk, combined with similar signals from Richard Holbrooke, suggests that the Obama Administration will take a tougher line with President Karzai and his failure to deal effectively with corruption at all levels of the Afghan government. It will be fascinating to watch the relationship between the White House and President Karzai evolve over the coming months. Afghanistan’s elections have been delayed from March until probably September of this year, and the more beleaguered President Karzai feels, the more he has tended to lash out at his critics, especially NATO. (Recently, he even hinted that he might turn to Russia for military support.)

Following years of virtually unconditional support for the Karzai government, Washington now seems to be realizing that the Afghan population is tilting dangerously away from its earlier support – indeed, enthusiasm – for the Karzai regime and the international mission. After the high hopes of 2002-04, ordinary Afghans are expressing greater frustration at the lack of security and material improvement in their lives, and anger at the ineffectiveness and corruption of their own government. (Visiting Afghanistan last December, my fellow travelers and I heard a number of Afghans in Kabul and Kandahar expressing this anger very clearly.)

Most importantly, there are also signs that Washington is scaling back its objectives and expectations in Afghanistan. In her US Senate confirmation hearing in January, Hillary Clinton’s comments notably did not include any references to military victory as an objective. In fact, the word “victory” did not appear once in the transcript of her testimony. Instead, she said that the American goal in Afghanistan was to employ “a broad strategy that reduces threats to our safety and enhances the prospects of stability and peace.” Her choice of words – *reducing* threats and enhancing the *prospects* for stability – hinted at a more limited set of expectations for US policy.



Sure enough, a few days after Clinton made these comments, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that the US needed more “realistic and limited” objectives in Afghanistan, or it would face failure. “My own personal view is that our primary goal is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for terrorists and extremists to attack the United States and our allies. And whatever else we need to do flows from that objective,” he said on January 27. “If we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of a Central Asian Valhalla over there we will lose.”

What should we make of all these signals? We will almost certainly know within weeks – or at most a few months – when the Administration completes its policy reviews and hard evidence of any new approach becomes visible. In broad brush strokes, however, it appears that the US intends to increase its diplomatic, development and military commitment to the Afghan operation, while simultaneously scaling back expectations and focusing on a narrower set of objectives for the mission. As thousands more forces flow into the country and a new policy is rolled out, 2009 is therefore poised to be a transformative year for the operation.

Time Is Running Out

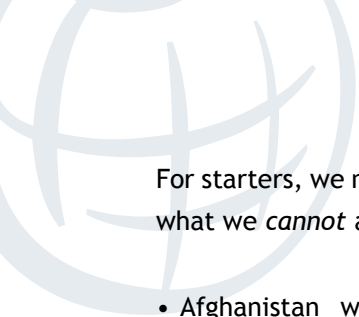
Of course the details of any new policy approach will be all important, but there is an urgent need to narrow the goals of the Afghan mission. At the end of 2001, when the Taliban had just been driven from power, the international community prescribed a very ambitious nation building project for Afghanistan, but then provided paltry resources to realize this vision. It quickly became apparent that a few thousand international troops in Kabul and a few billion dollars in development aid were simply not enough to establish security, minimally effective governance, and a foundation for development in Afghanistan. Only when things starting going bad did NATO begin to deploy forces – by dribs and by drabs – to outlying provinces, including Canada’s battle group in Kandahar.

Since then, we have been fighting what is, in effect, a holding operation.

Those early post-Taliban years represented a tragically missed opportunity to extend the authority of the new Afghan government outwards to the regional centres of the country and to fill at least part of the vacuum left behind by the fleeing Taliban – at a moment of great popular support for the new Afghan regime and the international mission, and of weakness and disarray within the Taliban. Exploiting this opportunity, however, would have required a much greater commitment than the international community – most notably, the US – was willing or perhaps able to make at the time.

With sufficient resources, this type of strategy might have been feasible as late as 2007. But that was then, and now, unfortunately, the window of opportunity appears to have closed. The Karzai government has lost its luster; Afghans are increasingly disaffected and suspicious of international motives; and the insurgency has continued to grow and strengthen and extend its reach. The Taliban still cannot defeat NATO forces in a stand-up fight, but it has nevertheless been making gains by undermining Afghans’ sense of security and confidence in the Kabul government and the international operation. And it has done so despite losing battle after battle with NATO forces, despite decapitating blows from Predator strikes against insurgent leaders in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and despite the fact that most Afghans say they do not want the Taliban to come back.

The international effort in Afghanistan is not destined to fail – let us be clear about that. But it almost certainly *will* fail if the US and NATO do not adjust to new circumstances by reducing their ambitions, not only because the conditions are no longer conducive to the more sweeping goals of the initial (under-resourced) nation building project, but also because the clock is ticking on how long Afghans themselves will tolerate a major international military presence of tens of thousands of foreign troops in the midst.



For starters, we need to be frank with ourselves about what we *cannot* accomplish:

- Afghanistan will not be a shining example of democracy or human rights. The best that we can hope is that it will be governed through a more or less representative set of institutions that Afghans themselves view as legitimate, but that might not be fully “democratic” and might involve a great deal of local autonomy.
- Security will remain a serious problem. The insurgency will not be completely defeated. Military victory is not possible and violence will continue (although, hopefully, at a much lower level).
- The border with Pakistan cannot be sealed or controlled or even effectively monitored, and there will continue to be insurgents based in the borderlands of Pakistan. That is why the Afghanistan conflict cannot be addressed in isolation from Pakistan’s own challenges in dealing with militants on its side of the border, and it is also why the Obama Administration’s talk of a regional diplomatic approach is so welcome and necessary.

No amount of improved coordination or increased resources from NATO or aid donors will make it possible to achieve those goals.

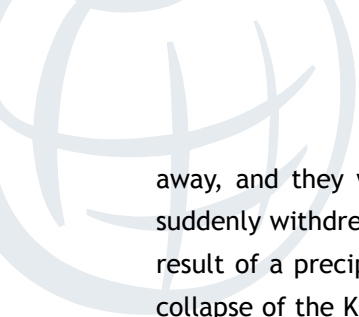
So what should be the goals of the international operation? What might be the elements of a more modest and realistic and achievable strategy in Afghanistan?

First, at the broadest level, NATO should focus on what’s really important. It is no longer a matter of what we *want* to accomplish. The question now is what we *must* accomplish, in whatever time remains. Our core objective should be to prevent Afghanistan from posing the kind of threat to international security that it did during the 1990s, when its territory served as a base of operations for groups that conducted global

attacks. This is the main reason NATO has devoted blood and treasure to this mission. In the long term, lasting stability in the region will require sustained development and economic opportunity. However, we do not normally fight wars for development. It was possible to fudge this fact when conditions in Afghanistan were still relatively benign and there was still time to work towards numerous objectives. But now the time is limited; NATO can only accomplish so much; and the international mission needs to focus on defining and pursuing core objectives.

Second, the international community can only hope to *reduce* the level of insecurity in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. The United States especially needs to abandon “War on Terror” thinking and to adopt a new view of militancy in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Pashtun belt as a long term problem to be managed, not one that can be defeated. Such a reformulation would not require stopping all counterinsurgency efforts, or pulling NATO forces out of southern or eastern Afghanistan, or abandoning efforts to strengthen the Afghan government and its key institutions. It might, however, involve a new approach to the insurgency – perhaps even removing the Taliban, *per se*, from the list of enemies and recognizing that some (if not many) Taliban fighters have essentially local concerns.

But this points to a conundrum, because we face a real threat from violent jihadist groups who have transnational agendas, some of whom are allied with elements of the Taliban and based in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Anyone who thinks that this threat is a mere figment of George Bush’s imagination should read the April 2008 report by the General Accountability Office of the US Congress, which painted a distressing picture of al-Qaeda’s strength in those parts of Pakistan. They could also read the European Police Office’s report from the same month, which reached a similar conclusion and warned that jihadist groups are using that territory to organize attacks on the European Union. It would be irresponsible for any western policymaker to ignore the reality of these threats. They cannot be wished



away, and they would not simply disappear if NATO suddenly withdrew from Afghanistan. The more likely result of a precipitous NATO departure would be the collapse of the Kabul government, the remobilization of Northern Alliance militias, and a new civil war in Afghanistan. We saw what happened the last time the world abandoned Afghanistan to civil war.

So, to summarize: (1) NATO cannot “win” militarily, (2) NATO cannot simply leave without making the situation worse, and (3) the clock is ticking on Afghan public support for a major international presence in the country. That’s the essence of the dilemma we now face, or what Joe Biden referred to as the “mess.” And a real mess it is.

Given the discouraging trends of the mission and the constraints of limited time and resources, it is difficult to imagine any effective policy for Afghanistan at this stage that would not involve gaining a better understanding – and to some extent responding to – the needs and wishes of “local” Taliban. Maybe, just maybe, there is a bargain to be struck with rural Afghans: “You go about your own lives and run your own local affairs, and we won’t bother you, on one condition: you do not allow your homes and lands to be used as a staging ground by others who wish to overthrow the Afghan government or to launch attacks on targets in other countries.”

It is a live and let live strategy. And of course it is full of flaws. How, in practice, could one separate “local” Taliban from others who have transnational ambitions? Why would any insurgents agree to strike a deal now, when the momentum seems to be on their side? And how could the basic bargain - non-interference in local affairs in exchange for self-policing – be enforced? These are all important questions and there are no simple answers, but bear in mind that every option in Afghanistan looks terrible – until you consider the alternatives, which are usually worse.

Fortunately, few people in Washington seem to think the situation can be turned around simply deploying more US forces. Additional troops are needed: they will make it easier for NATO to hold territory that has been cleared, and to accelerate the training of the Afghan National Army and Police. But 20,000 or 40,000 or even 60,000 more NATO soldiers will not defeat the insurgency.

Implications for Canada

The Harper government has stated that Canadian forces will depart from all of Afghanistan in 2011 (not just from Kandahar, which was what Parliament called for in its March 2008 motion). However, given all the changes that are expected in the Afghan mission and the importance that Canada has accorded to this operation to date, would it not make greater sense to consider Canada’s options and interests as conditions evolve over the course of 2009? We have at least until the end of this year to make any final decisions about what role, if any, Canada will play in Afghanistan beyond 2011, and by that time we should have a much clearer picture of the Obama administration’s policy towards the region.


However, our political leaders seem reluctant to re-open the issue – perhaps not surprisingly, given that (1) opinion polls indicate that most Canadians do not want to extend Canada’s contribution to the mission, (2) the current Conservative government holds only a minority of seats in Parliament and still hopes to make inroads in the traditionally anti-war province of Quebec, and (3) the Liberal Party, whose new leader is working to establish greater coherence and unity within the party, has been internally divided over this issue in the past. Politicians cannot be expected to commit political suicide, but there are moments when the national interest demands taking political risks – in this case, the risk of re-opening the crucial question of whether and how Canada might contribute to the



Afghanistan mission beyond 2011.

Doesn't Canada have a direct security interest in a more stable Afghanistan and South Asia, which is now, as the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid puts it, the "homeland of global terrorism"? Beyond our own national security, are we not also a country that has historically contributed to international security efforts around the globe? Isn't the prospect of instability in nuclear-armed Pakistan a serious threat to regional and global security?

If we conclude that the Afghanistan mission will end in failure, or that it is wrong-headed, Canada should not stay in Afghanistan beyond 2011. But how can we make such judgments without seeing and discussing the details (and early impact) of the Obama Administration's new Afghan policy? And in the end, if we decide that this mission is important to Canada and we choose to end our contribution, what would that say about us and our role in the world?

Canada's decision to send a battle group to Kandahar in 2005 was made with limited analysis and virtually no public debate of Canada's larger interests. Our next decision – to leave or stay, and, if we stay, in what capacity – surely requires a more serious public discussion. Otherwise, we are likely to stumble out of Afghanistan as thoughtlessly as we stumbled into Kandahar. That may be a satisfactory outcome to many people, but it is a lamentable way to run our foreign policy. 

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