

Afghanistan: Looking Forward

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Just as exaggerated proclamations of success followed military victory in Afghanistan in 2001 and rapid political developments in 2002, so now have increased fighting, a focus on weak government, and a lack of instant economic progress resulted in exaggerated pronouncements of failure. The situation is grave, but far from hopeless. What went wrong has been examined in extensive detail at a policy level, but the implementation of policies has attracted little attention. The result has been an intensifying search for broad policy that often carries with it an unexamined assumption that better policy will produce rapid improvement. This is unrealistic.

A major insurgency in a weak state will not be defeated quickly, particularly when that insurgency enjoys significant sanctuary in a neighboring weak state. This is especially true when the counterinsurgency is waged by a collection of sovereign nations that move slowly to align individual national views of how to proceed.

At a glance...

- *The situation in Afghanistan is grave but far from hopeless.*
- *Although stabilization is a long term task, short term action is needed to reverse perceptions of Taliban progress, which are weakening international resolve and Afghan public support for the mission.*
- *Some elements of the existing international strategy towards Afghanistan require review; nevertheless, the critical need now is not to debate new strategies but to implement the existing strategy more effectively.*
- *Such an emphasis on improved implementation would include clarifying lines of decision-making and authority, among other things.*

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Those views will remain different because each government brings different domestic political constraints, theories of how to proceed and levels of national political commitment to the mission. Yet if the coalition of military and economic donors has many weaknesses it also commands resources that dwarf those available to an insurgency with very limited popular support.

In order to succeed, several factors have to coalesce. One is short-term progress in security to reverse the perception of impending doom. The second is clearer mid-term policies for progress in Afghanistan based on a realistic definition of success. A third is a broader regional focus, dealing particularly with Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia, whose conflicting policies and fears exacerbate the problems of Afghanistan. The second and third elements are inevitably long-term and much greater public clarity is needed about the probable length of the struggle in order to avoid disappointment and backlash down the road. Additionally, the Afghan government itself needs to be more honest and devoted to its people.

Equally important as the above points, but less noticed, is the need for far more attention to the mechanics of how extremely complex policies are implemented in Afghanistan. Policies will continue to be poorly managed without better performance by individual nations, particularly the US, to expand civilian personnel; strengthen their authorities; resolve nation-by-nation incoherence in civil authority structures; and utilize funding more flexibly.

Policy has a critical role, especially in the larger region around Afghanistan, but the hope that policy change alone will devise better implementation is exaggerated. Sovereign nations, particularly democratic ones, will not relinquish direction of their forces and funds to a single coordinator or commander. Better

implementation will not come through new strategy, as United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Chief Kai Eide has recognized.¹ Improved results require far more work on the practical aspects of how to improve coordination than any country committed to Afghanistan has devoted to the effort. Since many other experts are writing on the subject of policy, and since many of their conclusions reveal common recommendations, this paper is devoted principally to necessary measures for better policy implementation and to some of the immediate changes necessary to reverse the debilitating perception that everything is sliding downhill.

Assumptions

Assumptions provide the context within which to evaluate the possibility of recommendations being successful and the time needed to bring them to fruition. Therefore, it is well to spell them out early. Those which guide this analysis are as follows:

- Failure of the Afghan and international effort to build a state with broad popular support is likely to lead to the fragmentation of Afghanistan into separate power centres because there is no alternative – no general, army, party or dictator – presently available to hold the state together. Power sharing between different political, tribal and militia leaders has repeatedly failed throughout years of conflict. One may discuss at length the reasons for this failure, but the historical experience is very clear.
- A fragmented state will allow radical Islamic groups to reestablish power in at least some parts of Afghanistan, whether or not they can

¹ “We have a strategy...we haven’t implemented it...What I want is that we do not lose time by discussing grand strategies...Let’s focus on implementing better”. Kai Eide, Interview by Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, January 22, 2009.

fully control the state. This, in turn, will provide a strategic rear or base for threats to Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia, as well as expand the training and staging areas for threats to the United States and its allies. Attacks throughout Europe and America have been planned from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area before and after the commencement of the Afghan war. These attacks will continue as long as radicals maintain their bases and ideologies.

- NATO has limited political will. Long-term NATO / International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military support cannot be assumed, although the precise length of foreign political will is not calculable. Political will is dynamic, not static; that is, broadly accepted signs of progress will lengthen the period for which nations will be prepared to endure the military and economic costs of staying engaged.
- Fighting may last for many years even if the size and lethality of the fight diminishes.
- Afghan popular support for the presence of foreign forces is likely to decline over time, and is already doing so. However, the longevity of support for foreign forces will be conditioned by the strength of the perception that success in building a better future and providing security is possible, and that the foreigners are present not to rule but to help Afghans rule themselves. Diminishing civilian casualties will also be important. As with development funding and NATO political will, the perception of progress is a key ingredient to Afghan tolerance of foreign forces.
- As one of the poorest nations in the world, fragmented by years of war, Afghanistan will take years to develop effective governance structures and to knit back together the torn social fabric that underlies issues such as cor-

ruption. This process can be helped and influenced by foreigners, but not directed beyond the willingness of broad Afghan elements to make changes. Indeed, pressure for rapid social change has caused Afghans to turn against reformers, from King Amanullah to the Afghan communists. Change that is too rapid can be as destabilizing as an absence of change. Ultimately, the debate over a centralized vs. decentralized state must be decided by Afghans. Foreign imposition would be unacceptable and explosive. Some patience is in order; it took the United States eight years of war plus a decade to discard the ineffective Articles of Confederation in favor of the present Constitution.

- The role of Afghanistan's neighbors is critical. Over the last century Afghanistan has remained a weak state, most likely to be at peace when peace reflected regional consensus and most troubled when outside powers disagreed over their roles in the state. Thus, the role of the largest neighbors and regional players – including Iran, Russia and Pakistan – must somehow be reconciled with a common strategic purpose.

2 Regional policies include many dimensions. Russia views the Taliban as a threat, but is also suspicious of US motives in Central Asia. The results are contradictory; Russia sometimes helps the ISAF effort, as on Afghan debt rescheduling or opening overland supply routes, and sometimes hampers operations, as when it pressured Kyrgyzstan to close its US supply facility. US relations with Russia need clearer strategic prioritization. Iran knows the Taliban is a long-term threat with an uncompromising belief that Shia are heretics. Yet Iran appears to be building relations with some insurgent groups and putting economic pressure on Afghanistan by expelling Afghan refugees. These actions appear driven by concerns about how to counter US threats, particularly in cases of military action. A regional policy with Iran could encompass either an improvement in overall relations or limited cooperation on Afghanistan on issues like drugs, border security and even overland NATO supply routes that would reduce US dependence on Pakistan. In the case of Pakistan, a regional policy will need to include aligning support for a new civilian government with pressing Pakistani military authorities to shut down Taliban sanctuaries. One such approach is discussed in Ronald E. Neumann. "Borderline Insanity: Thinking Big About Afghanistan", *The American Interest*, November-December 2007: 52-58.

- Even if a better and more successful policy is developed to address regional issues, including but not limited to treating Pakistan and Afghanistan together, success cannot be assured and will certainly not be rapid. Therefore, broadly visible progress within Afghanistan is essential to maintain military and economic donor support.
- Drug cultivation will endure, although it can be reduced over time. In support of this premise, it is worth noting that on the one hand drug cultivation has already been reduced in many parts of Afghanistan and, on the other, there are almost no examples in the world of complete suppression of narcotics traffic.
- Poppy cultivation cannot be reduced without major improvements in the rural economy. Crop substitution is only a beginning. Roads, power, access to markets and efforts to bolster the agricultural industry are required to add value to crops and create jobs for the landless.

The Strategic Goals

With the above limitations and assumptions in mind it is time to reconsider ISAF's goals in Afghanistan. The goal of creating a liberal twenty-first century democracy with western values was and is excessive. Success needs to be redefined in terms of sustainable internal stability and preventing terrorist threats from Afghanistan affecting its regional neighbors and the broader international community. Just these objectives will be very difficult without encumbering the goals with excess expectations. In this context, sustainable stability means the creation of a government with enough popular backing to secure its people with limited foreign military and economic support. Building such a base of popular support requires, first, a popular belief that the

government will last more or less in its current form, a very high threshold of belief for people who have never known a stable government. Second, there needs to be a sense that the government is trying, albeit slowly, to provide basic fairness to its subjects, not just the rule of the rapacious over the alienated. In Western terms this is often defined as "justice," but that term needs to be understood as one of fairness to groups as well as individuals. It is not just about following the rules of Western-style laws. Finally, gradual economic progress is needed. However, economic development in the absence of security, a sense of fairness and belief in the longevity of the process will avail little. It will take decades to achieve sustainable economic development. Thus while it should parallel military and political progress, it logically cannot precede them in a time frame in which necessary foreign military support can be expected to endure.

Considered together, these goals are as much about psychology as definable indicators of progress. If people believe progress is possible, they can endure. If they lack that hope, then all the battles won and roads built will do little to secure their willingness to take risks or forego short-term grabs for money or power.

Multiple Writers Share Many Assessments

In the many recent writings on Afghanistan, there is a considerable overlap of recommendations and analysis. A summary of consistent recommendations would include:

- Donor aid needs to be more effective, and probably increased.
- The Afghan government needs to be reformed to reduce corruption.
- The Afghan government should be given

more control over its budget in order to encourage capacity building.

- Despite the danger of fragmentation, the theory of a highly centralized state should be reconsidered in light of the reality of a weak government with decentralized power centres.
- A regional policy should be implemented to discourage external support for insurgent/terrorist violence in Afghanistan.

These recommendations are generally sound; however, work on all these fronts will be slow to show progress. Realistic, shorter-term measures are needed to increase donor military and economic effectiveness, and thus regain the psychological initiative necessary for long-term corrections to bear fruit. Policy makers also need to be more realistic about the long-term requirements for Afghanistan's own security forces.

Mid-Term Security

Security of the population is a basic responsibility of sovereign powers and a necessary precondition for an effective counterinsurgency. ISAF learned rather painfully what should have been obvious much earlier: security is only meaningful if the population feels secure in its homes, at work and in travel. Yet a government that ties down all its forces securing the population leaves to the insurgents the initiative to choose when and where to fight. Manoeuvre forces, the supreme strength of the NATO/ISAF military, are essential to maintaining the initiative. These very basic, almost insultingly simplistic facts point to one conclusion: more forces are needed to secure the population and defeat the enemy. Policy makers must logically address the numbers needed for these purposes.

Manoeuvre units – that is, forces to patrol,

preempt, attack enemy concentrations and so forth – are required. The US will send 20,000-30,000 more troops with essential supporting and enabling equipment. The number needed has steadily increased when smaller, earlier requests were not met, a sobering reminder of the price of delay. The numbers asked for may be too small if the pace of insurgent reinforcements from Pakistan continues to increase, but the ISAF certainly did not request too many reinforcements and they need to be deployed much earlier than is likely. But while these forces can dominate cities, seek out insurgents, patrol borders and train Afghan security forces, they cannot secure the population. Their numbers are too few; they do not know the people well enough; and their purpose is not static defence. In short, foreign forces can prevent Taliban takeover, but cannot bring victory. Also, as the population is ever more caught between the insurgents on the one hand, and casualties and unintentional cultural insults from the foreigners on the other, the days when foreign forces are welcome are going to slip away. Thus the increase in foreign forces is a short-term necessity, but is neither a strategy by itself nor a solution.

From the foregoing perspective it is clear that much larger Afghan security forces are essential if the new state and its population are to be protected against an insurgency that may continue for many years. Unless the population feels that it is protected, no other effort to win loyalty and support can succeed. The logic for much larger Afghan security forces is compelling. Such forces will be expensive; require difficult decisions about how to sustain them; and pose long-term challenges to garner continued external funding, since Afghanistan is too poor to pay for the army and police it needs. In the long term, however, the Afghan government cannot defeat the insurgency without fielding significant forces.

Presently, the Afghan army is reaching its previous target of 70,000; the new target is 134,000. The police are to grow to 82,000, giving Afghanistan a total of 216,000 security forces. Iraq – which is slightly smaller than Afghanistan, has a smaller population, less difficult terrain and no secure base area for insurgents – now has over 600,000 security forces, with coalition forces providing another 130,000. Doubling the Afghan security forces would probably be justified on the basis of such simple calculations.³

Calculations could be made on the basis of historical insurgencies. Multiply the towns and villages in risky areas by some coefficient or look to the miles of roads that are now illegally taxed and terrorized. None of the calculations would be exact and all would indicate that many more Afghan forces are needed. Since it will take several years to create these reinforcements, it is probably sufficient now to call for a doubling of the force, to 300,000- 400,000, recognizing that adjustments can be made along the way, and to focus on deciding the character of the force and funding sources.

If the need for forces is clear, so too is the fact that Afghanistan is too poor to afford them on its own. It cannot afford to maintain the forces it has with their related equipment costs, still less the forces needed. Since the foreign powers, including the US, cannot provide the number of soldiers needed and probably cannot summon the political will to remain forever, and probably cannot summon the political will to remain forever, the outcome of the war will depend on efforts to sufficiently fund Afghan

forces. Afghan forces need to be built and sustained on a steady long-term basis. Funding must therefore be based on rational planning to avoid sudden fiscal crises. The logic of this consideration leads to the need for international agreements to provide funding for salaries and sustainment costs, with willing nations making long-term commitments to meet the need. For the US, this will mean building the required funds into the base budget rather than relying on uncertain “supplemental” budgets. Finding the money to pay for war rather than just raising the national debt will be painful, but not as painful as choosing between keeping American soldiers in battle and losing.

A decision to build a larger Afghan security force also raises the need to reexamine the so-far unsuccessful theories about the roles and missions of the forces. The US has built the Afghan forces in its own image: a military fights the war and police protect the people, a civilian function as American experts never tire of repeating. The theory is not working.

The army, having been rebuilt from the ground up, is doing fairly well. It seems to have broad national respect from Afghans. The so-called national police were formed from local militias and commanders, and have been riddled with corruption and oppression. There has been some progress in reform, but trying to train the force from the bottom up and reform the officer corps from the top down will take time.

The United States, with the support of international partners, is now trying to train five different types of police. It has not been successful in finding sufficient civilian mentors or training teams to resource the effort. New recruitment quotas are not being met, and efforts already in progress are not being adequately sustained. The US has years of prac-

³ Noted counterinsurgency expert, retired Lt. Colonel John Nagle recommends a figure of 250,000 for the Afghan Army alone. In an interview by “All Things Considered”, *National Public Radio*, November 20, 2008.

tice, doctrine and knowledge related to raising armies; but, building the police is a process of trial and error without the guidance of experience, aside from recent failures. The simple fact is that no police force has ever been built from the ground up in the midst of an insurgency. Americans have built forces they led, such as constabularies in Central America, and they have advised police forces in smaller programs. Successfully building a whole police force in a fragmented society while fighting an insurgency, however, is a new endeavour. The US may be on a better track now, but has not yet proven any of its theories in practice. Estimates of how long it will take to build the necessary police force are no more than educated guesses. Even if the theories of today prove more adequate than those used earlier, it is clear that the police will remain well behind the army in playing the essential role of securing the people – and the task is more urgent than ever.

If the police are less satisfactory in performance, slower to form, and less certain of success than the army, then within the context of expanding forces it could make sense to shift much of the burden of population security to the army.⁴ The command structures of the army are clearer. There are various tasks related to population security; those that involve forces stationed in towns and among the people probably should be left to the police, but securing and its ability to reinforce and support itself will grow much faster than

4 There are various tasks related to population security; those that involve forces stationed in towns and among the people probably should be left to the police, but securing the population also includes securing roads for safe travel, patrolling in the countryside and providing quick-reaction forces. Many of these tasks could be transferred to the army. Some observers have recommended the formation of units like the French Gendarmerie or Italian Carabinieri. In principle, there is much to commend in this idea. In practice, the US lacks the doctrine or qualified personnel to train such a force, and those who do (the Spanish, French and Italians) have shown no inclination to add the hundreds of additional trainers necessary. Moreover, it would also be years before another, new force would be useful.

that of the police. Instead of piling bigger challenges on an inadequate police force, it may make more sense to turn some of the broad security mission over to the army and concentrate on producing a smaller, but better and (maybe someday) more honest police force.

The recent changes in leadership in the Ministry of Interior provide a new opportunity to clean up and reform an institution widely perceived as corrupt. Diminishing the number of challenges to be faced at the same time could make sense. However, such a fundamental change would need the willing concurrence of the Afghan government. It is worth discussing, but is not something to be simply imposed from the outside.

A set of subordinate decisions must complement a strategic decision to increase the size of the Afghan security forces. One such subordinate decision regards the longterm funding of salary and sustainment expenses already discussed. Another is to meet the initial costs of a great deal of additional equipment. This burden will mostly have to be borne by the US as no one else has the funds. Allied consultation is needed, and increased allied funding will most likely be forthcoming if the US leads with its own decisions. Americans, however, should be realistic about what their allies will provide. If speed is important, the US should be careful not to waste too much time seeking more funding than it can likely collect from its allies while holding US initiatives in abeyance. In all this, the focus needs to be multi-year.

Implementing Security – Not Just Force Levels and Policy

Implementation will be as critical as the strategy itself. Two years after the decision to better equip the Afghan army, the shortage of trainers and embedded teams is almost

as great. Police mentors are not allowed to deploy with police units, thereby weakening training. If the personnel to implement funding decisions are not found, the US force will recreate the pattern of announcing a strategy; failing to resource it; then finding fault in the strategy and beginning the search for a new strategy, rather than fixing the implementation problems that caused the failure.

While the strategy of increasing the forces is essential, it will take several years to make an impact on the battlefield. Attention must therefore be given to short-term actions to reverse the perception of steady Taliban progress. Three areas are worth particular focus.

Short-Term Security

One is security of the main roads, especially those connecting the capital with major cities. The combination of attacks and illegal tolls is one of the most glaring and negative changes of recent years. It may be necessary to use some arrangements with local tribes and commanders to restore road security until more Afghan forces are available for the job. This will be difficult without simply reinforcing longer-term challenges to government authority. In discussing this issue, implementation trumps policy; that is, the government could decide to use tribes and find that they take money and arms to build up their local power base, tax travelers and do nothing for local security. This is what happened for several years in Iraq with efforts to use local security for pipelines.

Alternatively, given the same policy decision, tribes could be chosen carefully; sanctions imposed for failures to perform; support granted when tribes are engaged by insurgents; and the program controlled by the central Afghan government. It is important to run any such

program through Afghan authorities, perhaps the army with support from the intelligence services, since their knowledge of with whom to work is likely better than that of the US.

Any use of tribes and militias for security must be implemented in ways that build the authority of the central government rather than reinforce the fragmentation that has cursed Afghanistan to date. The Iraqi or “Anbar” model of raising forces based only on ties to the US military should be avoided. That model deferred to the future the very difficult integration of the new forces into the Iraqi state. In Afghanistan, such a result might well be fatal to even the most modest goal of building a sustainable state. Phrases like “community engagement” do not solve the dilemma. The Afghan countryside is a maze of overlapping and often contending tribal and militia factions. Peacemaking and tribal reconciliation are complex tasks for which foreigners are ill equipped and into which they should not delve.⁵

A second critical concern is to push security out into provinces close to Kabul, such as Wardak and Logar. Taliban success in destabilizing these areas does not indicate so much a strong insurgency as the absence of Afghan army, police and foreign forces. Assigning new ISAF and Afghan army forces to these provinces should help, but their presence on the ground must be continuous. Maintaining such a presence will be difficult given the other demands on forces, but success in these areas would carry a strong message that the Taliban

⁵ In early 2009, a new experiment is underway to create local forces under Ministry of Interior command in certain districts of Wardak and Logar provinces. Whether they will improve security is unknown. Even if security improves, the price may be too high; the new groups may turn out to be local militias rather than extensions of government authority. Both the security and the political implications of these developments will need to be monitored carefully.

a presence will be difficult given the other demands on forces, but success in these areas would carry a strong message that the Taliban are not on a steady path to power.

In addition, crime in Kabul needs serious attention. The prevalence of kidnappings and robberies contributes to an Afghan sense of insecurity, underscores the weakness of the Kabul government, and directly hinders investment and job creation. For Afghans, the pervasive criminality is much more emblematic of the weak Kabul government than the occasional terrorist spectacle. Working closely with a new minister of interior to reduce crime in Kabul should be a major short-term priority.

Why Strategy is Not Enough

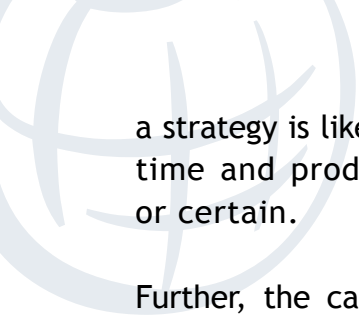
Afghanistan needs everything, lacks everything and wants it all yesterday. Writings on the subject of development constantly reinforce the same points: more local control, better efficiency, less duplication and faster progress. These points are correct. What is lacking from the discussion is a realistic appraisal of how implementation can be strengthened. Calls for a single coordinating point, new coordination bodies or new strategies vastly exaggerate what such steps are likely to produce.

A common strategy can outline big principles of direction and purpose but, among sovereign nations, strategy alone will always fall short in producing the degree of coordination and synchronized action needed for better performance. Simply put, strategy is a broad statement of how to reach a goal. The implementation of strategy requires countless decisions by subordinate elements. It is the job of leaders at various levels to ensure that such decisions are made and implemented in ways that avoid duplication or deviation from the goal.

In Afghanistan, with 60 economic donors and thousands of troops, there are literally thousands of decisions made every day. National outlooks and theories come into these decisions. National capitals have their own regulations; institutions have their own theories; and none are prepared to simply take orders from another nation, although they will try to coordinate. Even in military structures like NATO, orders are subject to refusal by national contingents because of their national policies and pre-established limitations (caveats). Strategy is an important starting point for coordination, but only that. Willing cooperation is what brings international actors together. When that cooperation breaks down, the mechanisms for dispute resolution are essential.

There are significant issues that require policy review. For example, should donors provide price supports for wheat or cotton as an alternative to more labour-intensive activities to create rural employment? The so-called “good performers” fund might significantly expand the flow of funds to Afghan provinces that are poppy free and, in the process, provide sizable resources that can be targeted according to local priorities. Issues such as these, specific but requiring large capital inputs over time, are rightly policy decisions requiring coordination with capitals.

But for the mass of day-to-day operations, the search for progress through a new strategy is a false hope. Strategic deliberations take time; the London Compact required three months of steady negotiations that tied up the few effective Afghan ministers in lengthy deliberations that had a real cost in terms of their own work. What comes out of such a process — in the case of London, a list of some 40 priorities or benchmarks — is important but still very general. It can only be the beginning of a massive process of implementation. Another search for



a strategy is likely to take up a great deal of time and produce nothing more detailed or certain.

Further, the call for increased coordination and planning is important but has built-in tensions that need to be understood. There are as yet few talented Afghan bureaucrats. Planning enterprises cost significant investments of staff and time. While large donor organizations and even larger military ones can throw impressive numbers of personnel at an issue, the Afghan government has no similar resources. A multiplication of planning and coordinating bodies begins to result in more planning than execution.

This is all the more problematic in a society where plans or strategies are rarely followed automatically. Every successful negotiation of a strategy requires a follow-up negotiation on implementation and then a process of oversight, whether by Afghans or foreigners. Essentially, the benchmarks of the London Compact form a development strategy. Whether or not a new strategy is needed, the problems that rendered the results of the old one so unsatisfactory must be resolved.

Implementation Counts

On more than one occasion, authorities in Kabul thought an issue resolved only to find a month or two later that nothing had changed because of a lack of consensus in the responsible working group of Afghans and international donors. The problem was inevitably differing views on how to implement something. When the issues were significant, it was sometimes possible to bring ambassadors and development mission directors from the relevant countries together under UNAMA leadership and hammer out a compromise. Sometimes this was done with Afghan ministers and sometimes it was useful to reach a common position from which

the international contributors could engage the Afghans at the ministerial level. This was slow 10 and grinding work, but it produced a common implementation approach to some serious energy problems. A similarly focused effort led to an agreement on which ministries have priority in coordinated international efforts to strengthen staff capacities. It was an informal process of problem solving but it produced results and it could be expanded; however, there were many constraints.

Numerous changes are needed to enlarge and systematize the problem-solving approach to international coordination and improve results in Afghanistan. Resource decisions in capitals are required for changes on the ground. Yet an examination of these requirements has been ignored in the search for strategic policy changes. Fixing the issues described below is not a substitute for policy, but without changes in them any strategy will fall seriously short of its goals.

Who is in Charge: Nations need to put one person in charge of civilian programs. In most European states, development and foreign policy are under separate ministries. If there cannot be one British or German or Canadian official in charge of both political and economic decisions and able to coordinate the two with the military, it is strange to think this can be remedied by giving more power to a UN official. Each nation needs to review its decision-making structure within Afghanistan to focus on improving and accelerating decision making. Harmonizing the use of resources with rapid decision making is important in an environment where development and combat must be closely linked to the overall goal of creating a sustainable state.

Adequate Senior Civilian Staff: Civilian staffs need to have adequate numbers to fulfill their missions. The United States Agency for

International Development (USAID), although the largest donor organization in Afghanistan, is seriously lacking in this regard and stands as an example of a problem that is probably true of other nations as well. Senior staff levels have been established essentially at the numbers needed to run a normal mission where the task is to implement long-term development. While this is required, so too is constant high-level intervention for crisis resolution.

Strategic reassessment produces a third, nearly constant requirement for senior leadership; that is, do the programs designed for yesterday meet the needs discovered today? Are the programs adequate to meet strategic goals? Is some major shift of resources needed to meet new challenges caused by the security environment, such as civilian resettlement after combat in a particular area or reinforcement of the work of a competent governor who has suddenly replaced an incompetent one, and whose efforts need support to raise public confidence in the government? Each of these demands, for overall management of development, crisis intervention and strategic assessment demand constant senior direction. While the US military has made great progress staffing US headquarters (more about NATO/ISAF below), to provide such direction, USAID has been forced to limp along in the rear under the limitations of worldwide staffing levels completely inadequate for expanding missions it has been handed.⁶

Adequate Field Staff: Staffing levels in the field are lamentably low. One USAID officer is present in most Provincial Reconstruction

Teams (PRT). This is completely inadequate to give provincial level support to military-operations and to ensure coordination with and oversight of national USAID programs run from Kabul. Leave, transfer and recruitment problems keep many of these positions vacant for at least two months every year, and often longer. Some other donors are better staffed at the PRT level, but all donors' senior and midlevel staffs at the major military headquarters⁷ are inadequate for effective coordination and integration of actions. The result is that, while militarily each PRT is in a military chain of command, the civilian efforts of each PRT report to a variety of institutions: embassies in Kabul, donor development agencies in Kabul and national ministries of development in various capitals. Efforts to improve coordination through a steering group in Kabul are well-intended, but ponderous, bureaucratic and lack an ability to direct field work. Short staffing in the field leaves too few officers on the receiving end of an impossible number of reports, directions and requests for information. It remains unlikely that new calls for a single coordinator or improved central direction will be any more successful than past efforts. While a perfect solution is unlikely, building significant donor (an Afghan) coordinating bodies at the level of the regional commands could improve coordination and awareness of what is happening in the provinces.

Flexibility in Resource Use: Generally, economic development programs are implemented over multiple years, with funding set annually; in practice, a two-year or longer cycle is normal as decisions move to capitals and are factored into annual budgets. Such planning is essential and must continue. But when development has

6 A study by the American Academy of Diplomacy and the Stimson Center estimates that USAID needs over 1,000 additional permanent staff to meet its needs. See AAD and SC (2008). *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future*. Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.academyofdiplomacy.org/publications/FAB_report_2008.pdf.

7 The regional commands are designated by their geographic areas of responsibility as RC-S, RC-E, RC-W and RC-N.

to go hand-in-hand with the overall effort to build sustainable government in the midst of an insurgency, there is also a requirement to meet short-term contingencies. Some of this requirement can be met by enlarging financial reserves, but many of the needs require bureaucratic flexibility as well. Since USAID lacks the personnel to execute smaller local contracts, each new requirement must be met by issuing, and often negotiating changes in, large “umbrella” contracts. At a minimum, the expenditure for contractor overhead is excessive, not to mention bitterly resented by Afghans who feel that far too much money labelled as assistance only goes to enrich contractors. Moving more of the money through Afghan agencies is certainly, and increasingly, part of the answer. Nevertheless, it will take time to accomplish this as the Afghan government must still build the ministerial and provincial capacity to expand the execution of budgets. Time will also be needed to design, with the Afghan government, new procedures to allow donors to monitor Afghan expenditures in order to meet the oversight requirements of Congress and other donor parliaments. In the short run, more needs to happen quickly in the provinces. USAID needs the personnel and authority to execute more contracts, rather than sending everything through Kabul and a large contractor. This, in turn, requires a policy change in Washington to field the essential personnel.

For other nations, the issues will be different. All economic assistance handled by Great Britain’s main aid agency, the Department for International Development (DFID), must be explicitly for economic development. This is a laudable requirement, but one that makes it difficult for DFID to respond to short-term requests to support British military activities when the needed actions do not fit the institutional model (DFID, 2002). For each nation, the changes essential

to improving effectiveness may be different. Each country’s government needs to review its bureaucratic policies and staffing to find ways to improve flexibility and effectiveness.

Bureaucratic Risks: Many commentators have stressed the need to use more Afghan contractors, subcontractors and NGOs to build Afghan capacity and reduce foreign overhead. At the provincial level, contracting directly with local companies, NGOs and local authorities would accelerate local buy-in and project implementation. However, the discussion among experts to date has lacked an understanding of the parallel need to reexamine donor standards of risk. Assistance agencies are accountable to their governments and publics for effective use of funds. This creates numerous requirements for fiscal prudence. Can an Afghan business demonstrate that it has an effective business plan to go along with an apparently good idea? Does an Afghan NGO have an ability to prove it has in place all the required financial oversights that are needed to prevent waste and fraud? Is an Afghan NGO really an NGO or a for-profit contractor? While such questions neither can nor should be ignored, the absence of certainty obstructs rapid project implementation. There is real tension between the concurrent requirements for speed and heavy fiduciary oversight.

The answer is not to throw out oversight, but to raise the level of acceptable risk with small projects, perhaps up to the \$100,000 level, while developing new standards to evaluate the results. Approximately a quarter of all small business startups in the US fail within two years.⁸ Donors need to consider accepting similar levels of risk in order to move more

⁸ There is a debate about the number of failures, with some estimates as high as one third of business within two years; however, the one-quarter estimate has a solid, if somewhat dated, statistical basis. See Shane, Scott (2008). “Startup Failure Rates – The REAL Numbers”, *Small Business Trends*. Available at: <http://smallbiztrends.com/2008/04/startup-failure-rates.html>.

resources quickly through Afghan hands, thus increasing the pace of small-project implementation. At the local level, this will require creativity in designing measures to control waste and fraud. Donor decisions to accept risk, however, can only be made at national levels. It must be explained in advance to parliaments and publics, because ad hoc explanations will be considered excuses. Without national level changes in standards of acceptable risk, agency personnel in the field cannot be expected to risk their careers by being held accountable for higher failure rates.

Increase UNAMA staff: UNAMA has had major success. It was instrumental in negotiating the original political institutions of Afghanistan and central to the negotiations of the London Compact. Some particularly knowledgeable UNAMA officers in Kabul and the field have had useful influence far beyond their numbers. But like other civilian organizations, UNAMA's staff and resources have had difficulty keeping up with ever-expanding missions in Kabul and the provinces. UNAMA's responsibility for overall donor coordination has grown. Its staff, particularly its senior staff, has not grown to the necessary level. As fighting has spread, UNAMA has been unable to establish critical field offices. Instead, requirements for secure operating facilities and protection for movement and field operations has and will continue to grow. A full-scale UNAMA review of its resources would be appropriate; however, for such a review to produce the desired results, it will need support at headquarters and from the donors who alone can provide the funds to bring goals and means into better alignment.

Tour lengths: Afghanistan is a country where effectiveness is highly dependent on personal relationships and deep knowledge of local political, social and tribal factors. The short tours of international civilian staff work di-

rectly against their acquiring the necessary knowledge or maintaining continuity of ideas. Short tours are driven largely by the need to find volunteers within donor ministries. Clearly, the need for large staffs cannot be met by requiring everyone to stay for years. But neither can we expect to improve performance by insisting endlessly that what has been our staffing practice is the only way things can be done. Each donor nation needs to undertake an intensive examination to decide on key positions that require greater continuity of knowledge. This investigation should be followed by changes in staffing practices and incentives that each donor finds necessary in order to maintain critical functions with longer-serving staff or with repeat tours that draw on knowledge previously acquired.

Military Implementation

A great deal of ink has been spent discussing how NATO/ ISAF effectiveness could be improved. Most of the policy discussion has been focused on three elements: the need for more troops, the problem of caveats and the call for a new strategy. The first two problems are real and the third is important, if overvalued. But there are many additional issues that have undermined NATO performance. If they are not fixed, NATO performance will continue to be disappointing.

NATO Headquarters and Staffing Issues: NATO/ISAF needs to seriously reexamine its use of resources during its mission. ISAF headquarters in Kabul is a patchwork of national contributions. Essentially, nations claim headquarters assignments based on a variety of considerations, many of which may be difficult to change in an alliance based on political consensus. The results have been uninspiring. There has been a proliferation of generals. The English standard (the language of com-

mand) is sometimes weak. Some officers remain as little as four months in Afghanistan, just long enough to disrupt any coherent plan that might have emerged from a predecessor and not long enough to learn their jobs or know their teams. If this were not bad enough, many nations, including the US, have been slow to fulfill their commitments to provide staff. Vacancies make constant transitions even more difficult and magnify wasted effort.

The manning document for ISAF Headquarters, that is, the established requirement for staff that nations are asked to supply, has never been adequate to undertake the complex job of operational control and coordination with the civilians that ISAF assumed with the dissolution of the US-led Coalition Forces Command - Afghanistan (CFCA) that previously had this mission. The realignment of US command responsibilities will help but it is unlikely to be sufficient without adequate staff support. A staff in a permanent state of flux can never be adequate, no matter what its numbers.

These are long-standing and well-recognized problems within military circles. To be addressed properly, national governments need to support the reexamination of form-to-function and the resulting recommendations. Without high level political support for change, the various national militaries are unlikely to make much progress on their own.

Regional Headquarters Issues: The problems experienced by ISAF HQ in Kabul are even more serious in some regional commands. The American headquarters in Regional Command East (RC-E) at Bagram Air Base is a major institution designed originally to be large enough to coordinate operations throughout the country. However, its sister command at Kandahar (Regional Command South or RCS) is manifestly too small for the more complex

task of coordinating the southern campaign, particularly given the multiple national contingents with different ideas. Despite the increase in fighting in the south, and the steady if inadequate flow of reinforcements, RC-S headquarters still consists of less than 300 officers. Too many of these serve short tours, making the problem even more serious.

The recent decision to lengthen RC-S commander tours to a year is an improvement, but by itself cannot meet the requirements for command and control. The new addition of a US deputy commander for stability operations (DCOM/Stability; in military language, the officer responsible for all the non-fighting aspects of the command, including coordination with civilian aid donors) is a further step in the right direction. But this new position has received an augmentation of only ten US officers despite recommendations for a much larger complement, perhaps as large as an additional brigade staff. All nations involved need to reexamine the command requirements. The US bears particular responsibility for making effective the command changes it has pushed hard to achieve.

Regional Command East (RC-E) also faces problems because of the previously mentioned inadequacies of ISAF headquarters in Kabul. ISAF HQ in Kabul is forced to concentrate heavily on operational issues, particularly in the south. Accordingly, ISAF's ability to coordinate effectively on broader areas such as governance and development is limited. One result has been that, lacking strategic guidance from ISAF HQ, US forces in the east who have the most robust capacities for multi-area work have had to create their own lines of coordination with the Kabul government and US embassy. While the results have been reasonably satisfactory, ISAF's inability to provide broad strategic oversight is likely to become more serious as the

Kabul government grows in strength.

Effective Command and Control: The need for effective command in the south is particularly acute because the area is divided into British, Canadian and Dutch areas of responsibility. The south has experienced a virtual balkanization into these national, some might say tribal, commands. Each command is more responsive to direction from its national capital than from ISAF. Some of this is inevitable in alliance warfare. No operation of sovereign allies has ever been fully unified into a single command, but the difficulties of coordination in the south are excessive. Here again, improvement in performance on the ground demands national willingness to examine the situation frankly and make changes.

US Command of all Fighting? Some have suggested that the solution should be to grant the US full control of all southern operations, expanding its own forces and relegating the other national contingents to less demanding duties in other parts of the country. This is a deeply flawed idea. It is obviously insulting to the soldiers of other nations who have paid a serious price in blood. The resulting friction would add to the damage NATO is already sustaining because of the different national caveats. Practically, the US is not in any position to rapidly replace the roughly 20,000 allied troops in the south. It is very unlikely that the situation will improve if the reinforcements currently sought – and not yet available – are fully absorbed, only to replace the forces already present.

NATO Funding Policy: In addition to staff and command problems NATO needs to re-examine its long-held position on how forces are funded. Generally, each nation supplying forces is responsible for all costs of supplying and maintaining those forces. In general, this principle is correct and probably the only one

that would work. But some kinds of forces are extremely expensive to maintain in combat operations, especially helicopters. The result of the full funding requirement is that some nations are unwilling to deploy assets they might send if maintenance costs were shared. Others deploy equipment but establish limitations on its use, such as the number of flight hours, so they can afford maintenance.

Great care would have to be taken in any re-examination to make sure that shared funding did not become a vehicle for some nations to evade proper responsibility for difficult funding decisions. In selected cases, however, the willingness of a few wealthier nations to support others could pay big dividends by expanding the “enablers” so essential to effectiveness in operations. The US has already taken some steps in this direction with nations from the former eastern bloc, supplying extensive equipment for deployments from Poland and some other contingents. The issue of NATO funding needs broader examination. The United States shouldered much larger burdens with the lend-lease programs of World War II. It may be time to look again at rationalizing burden sharing.


Tour Length of Combat Forces: Tour lengths are problematic for combat units, trainers, and civilian and military staffs. At fifteen months, the US tours strain the force, but allied units and advisors that arrive for four- to six-month tours are gravely handicapped in performing their mission. Advisors are an essential element in building the effectiveness of Afghan security forces, but are in critically short supply. Short tours further undermine the effort. While foreign governments are critical of the pace of reform and development in the Afghan forces, they need to shoulder part of the blame.

Integrated Civil-Military Funding: Another issue that reduces ISAF effectiveness is its lim-

ited ability to bring quick impact projects to bear in support of military operations. The US military has an enhanced ability to coordinate military and civic action programs because it has the funding to do so, primarily through the Commanders Emergency Relief Program (CERP). A few nations are expanding this practice, Canada among them, but the effort is still generally underfunded. In a few cases, the US has been able to expand its own use of CERP to enhance ISAF effectiveness. Perhaps other nations could design different ways to reach the same goal, through more effective coordination of civil and military programs. One model may not fit all, but more could and should be done.

Strategy Still Counts

Tactics are not a substitute for strategy. Donor and Afghan government effectiveness are required for success in Afghanistan. The problem of Pakistan needs attention. The Afghan government needs to be more honest and work more for its citizens. All these and many more strategic issues that need attention will have their due in other papers in this series. Yet the search for an improved strategy will accomplish little if it serves only to avoid many difficult decisions that are themselves essential to implementing the strategy. Instead, we need to understand that success will require simultaneous attention to three broad areas.

One is certainly strategic: to realistically re-focus the goals of the international community. Another is short-term security actions to reverse the belief that international efforts in Afghanistan are in a downward spiral. Without short-term improvements, the resulting loss of confidence in Afghan and foreign publics alike could cost the mission dearly long before the results of any long-term strategic change have time to take effect. The third area is the one that so much of this paper is focused on: the authorities, practices and human and material resources needed for effective implementation of strategy. The US and the international donor community can perform much more effectively than they have to date, but to do so it must give sustained national level attention to the implementation of their strategies. The dedication of the fighters and civilians on the ground is exemplary; they must be given the tools to be effective. 

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