

LAST THROW OF THE DICE? US STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

After languishing for several years as the West's "forgotten war" following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Afghanistan has risen to the top of the international agenda once more as political instability, the insurgency campaign, transnational terrorism, and state fragmentation spread. A "step change" in strategic thinking on Afghanistan is certainly needed, but until security conditions can be improved and political solutions found across South Asia, the entire region will inevitably remain a source of instability for the international community to confront.



Reuters / Omar Sobhani

US Special Representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan Holbrooke with President Karzai in Kabul, 15 Feb.

After seven years of war and protracted insurgency, Afghanistan looks more fragile than ever. Despite being "toppled" in 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks as part of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, the Taliban now increasingly control large areas of the south, west, and east of the country, with the ability to orchestrate attacks in large urban centers. The beleaguered President Hamid Karzai can barely exercise authority or guarantee security in Kabul, let alone the rest of his realm, as warlordism and insurgency spread. The fact that the government will be unable to hold proper presidential elections this year (irrespective of the exact date) underlines the fundamental problem facing Afghanistan today: Widespread corruption and systemic governance failures are major flaws, but the real issue is ultimately one of statewide insecurity.

A failure to put Afghanistan on a firmer footing will have alarming implications for the West. It would perpetuate civil war

between ethnic and regional factions in Afghanistan (albeit with the Taliban in the ascendancy); Afghanistan would remain at the center of the global drugs trade as the archetypal narco-state linked to organized crime and transnational terrorism; and the country's fragility could invite increased intervention by interested powers seeking to protect their interests as regional instability spreads. Failure in Afghanistan would also undermine the West's ability to engage the Muslim world in the future. This would not only be a significant military and propaganda victory for Muslim extremists, but more importantly would restore a safe haven for al-Qaida and affiliated groups to launch future attacks on the West. NATO's state-building credentials would also suffer a severe blow.

With so much on the line, it's not surprising that the deteriorating political and security environment in Afghanistan is causing increasing political heartburn in Western capitals. Given that the Obama adminis-

tration is in the process of adjusting its Afghanistan strategy, Europe will be hoping for some quick antacid relief, but neither "quick fix" exit strategies from a military surge or deferring the Afghan question purely to Pakistan will be sufficient to bring genuine stability. Concrete state building measures in South Asia underpinned by a fundamental realignment of strategic regional interests remain the only means by which such a change can be affected.

Mission creep in search of a policy: Taliban gains

While the Taliban were easily forced out of Kabul in 2001, it has proved impossible to remove them from the political and security landscape across the region. Not only do the Taliban remain a potent force drawing on widespread Pashtun support, they are increasingly complicating the strategic relations between India, Pakistan, and Iran as they vie for influence in Afghanistan. The areas on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border are beyond state control as the recent loss of the Swat valley to the Taliban attests.

From an international perspective, the one thing Afghanistan has not been lacking is multinational intervention. No less than 41 countries are involved in ISAF, with around a further 20 countries and institutions pledging additional financial and logistical support for the Karzai regime. The problem is that this support has not only been badly institutionally aligned across ISAF, NATO, UNAMA and Provincial Reconstruction Teams, but has been subject to national caveats and resource restrictions in order to limit exposure on the Afghanistan question. This stands in stark contrast to

the 160,000 troops injected into Iraq since 2003 compared to the 65,000 that have belatedly been mustered for Afghanistan. Even now, Afghanistan remains an *à la carte* option for European players only willing to pick courses deemed politically palatable, whereas for the US, it is very much becoming the *table d'hôte* of international counterinsurgency.

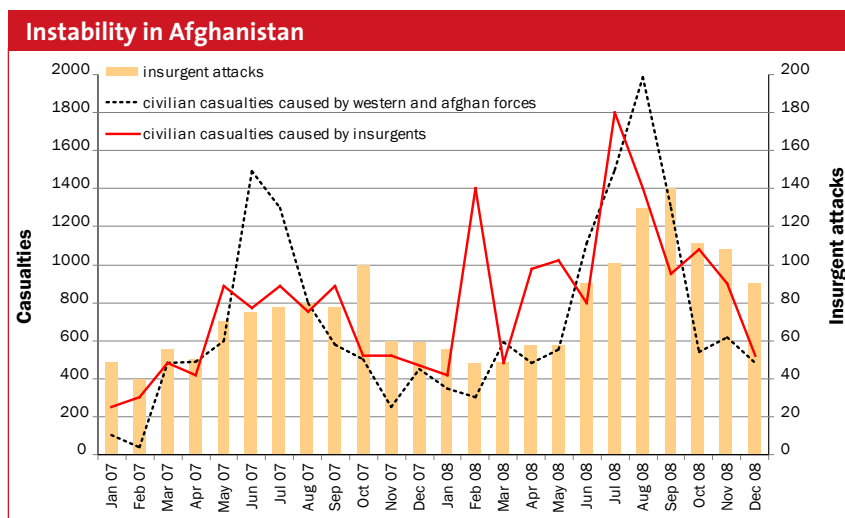
The situation wasn't helped by the score of analysts suggesting that a post-Taliban Afghanistan would inexorably move towards a stable Islamic democracy. In reality, local conditions always remained hostile and regional dynamics played straight into the hands of insurgents. The notion that the road to Kabul went through Washington rather than routing through Beijing, Moscow, Islamabad, Riyadh, New Delhi, and Tehran has proved to be a costly mistake, but not as costly as the fundamental lack of international aid to improve living conditions for the Afghan population. It now stands a dismal 174 out of 178 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index.

National turf wars on burden-sharing within the coalition were compounded by too much emphasis on supporting individuals rather than institutions. Centralism and patronage networks became the mantra for stability rather than widespread political participation, while vacillation over whether to engage or destroy the Taliban became the emblem of tactical indecision.

However, the biggest criticism of the international intervention in Afghanistan is not tactical, but strategic: It always lacked any overarching vision and unity of purpose as to what should be achieved either from an operational or normative perspective. Poorly defined ends were never matched to inadequate means. The net result is that insurgency levels are up, opium production is rife, the rule of law is breaking down on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border, and political fragility in Kabul remains brutally exposed. Afghanistan thus needs a new strategic approach, and it needs one fast.

Calibrating counter insurgency

The new US administration has wasted little time in coming to grips with this reality. The problem is that it remains far easier to identify "AfPak" problems rather than proposing concrete solutions in what will remain a dynamic situation. The overriding question any strategy must consider is what the international community actual-



Source: UNAMA/ ISAF

ly wants to achieve in Afghanistan relative to the available resources. In making this decision, the emphasis will almost certainly be placed on operational realities rather than normative predilections. Counterinsurgency operations will remain at the heart of the strategy, but with a greater emphasis placed on long-term political solutions rather than "military victory".

That said, the US will need to be careful to ensure that the Taliban does not infer even a vague hint of "capitulation" sitting between the lines of its new strategy; if they do, Kabul could be soon to fall. But at the same time, US assertiveness also needs to be subtly wedded to acknowledgement towards regional players that Washington now regards itself as part of the problem as much as the solution in Afghanistan in order to pave the way for longer term departure.

The current "surge, settle, strategize" mantra already takes a step in this direction. The deployment of 17,000 new troops by the US is not intended to "defeat" the Taliban, but to establish more favorable conditions for political deals with local tribes and warlords. This policy tilt has been broadly welcomed across the alliance, but any new political strategy inevitably brings new political risks; unless tactical and political engagement with the Taliban is properly aligned, the likelihood of failure is acute.

Negotiations: Risks and opportunities

The most pressing tactical challenge in the short term is what to do with the new troops. Opinion remains sharply divided as to whether they should be deployed in the

east and south or whether they should focus on holding urban areas and strategic locations to arrest Afghanistan's decline. In either eventuality, any military strategy must still overwhelmingly concentrate on preventing the emergence of a contiguous "state within a state" controlled by the Taliban in order to shift the balance towards political negotiations rather than civil war. This can only be achieved by a stronger show of coalition resolve, both now and in the future.

It remains crucial from a political perspective to wait for military gains to take effect before entering into negotiations. Failure to do so would merely hasten the Taliban's return to power given their strategic ascendancy. And even if the Taliban is militarily dented, it still remains highly uncertain as to how many groups would be amenable to serious negotiations rather than drawing on ethnic Pashtun support from Pakistan. But what must not be in doubt is the broad basis on which any agreement would be struck: Negotiations *must* be based on recognition of the sovereign authority of the Afghan government and its security forces throughout its territory as a means of building stable and accountable institutions.

For this to remain a credible prospect, the government in Kabul must be seen by the Taliban to be a long-term factor in Afghan politics. They must also believe that NATO resolve will not crack when called upon to send more troops as a means of keeping the Taliban and other groups at the negotiating table. Once the chairs have been taken, substantial political incentives will still need to be offered to in order to tip the balance towards constructive engagement on a national and local level. While this

will offend Western liberal sensibilities, it would be with a long term view of seeing political reforms at both ends of Afghanistan's political spectrum. This would start with the Karzai government in Kabul and extend down to tribal factions to ensure that the interests of the Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek, and Tajik populations can be balanced. At the very least, this might help to leave behind an Afghan government and political entity that could survive a Western withdrawal at some point beyond 2012 without internal meltdown and regional conflagration.

To this end, establishing effective central Afghan institutions still remains critical to the country's development. Local tribalism will always be a part of the Afghan political landscape, but it needs to become a defining feature of participatory politics rather than its nemesis. The capacities of the Afghan National Army and police force should also be vastly expanded. The addition of 4,000 new US troops to help train the planned enlargement of Afghan forces from 80,000 to 134,000 is a welcome start, but the overall figure still needs to be over 250,000 to secure the country. This would not only provide a stable foundation for Afghanistan to politically develop, but it would also be a useful buffer against fragmentation should insurgents fail to see sufficient returns from political engagement. A massive scaling up of international aid also needs to be injected: Insurgency campaigns are fueled by public disaffection and economic deprivation as much as ideological crusades.

Regional dynamics remain critical but complex

Unfortunately, even if such improvements are made within Afghanistan, it will be difficult to maintain the political regime in Kabul unless domestic reform is accompanied by a more nuanced approach to regional geopolitical complexities. The meeting of 90 delegates as a "big tent" approach towards Afghanistan in The Hague is a good start, but it will rapidly reveal the scale of the challenge ahead for the US.

Russia and China want to see the US presence in the region reduced in order to safeguard their Central Asian interests; Iran sees US troops as a clear strategic threat, while India sees any policy that favors Pakistan as detrimental to its own interests. Failure to address these problems will not only perpetuate asymmetrical warfare in Afghanistan, but as NATO's supply line vul-

nerabilities reveal, it leaves the West with few geopolitical options in play.

The common denominator in many of these grievances is Washington's approach to Pakistan. Its status as a major non-NATO ally of the US has insulated Pakistan from structural reforms and underpinned its predatory behavior towards Afghanistan. In order for Pakistan to become a strategic asset, as opposed to a liability in South Asia, the country will not only need major political commitments from the West to resolve its outstanding issues in Kashmir in the east and along the Durand Line in the west, but guarantees as to its territorial integrity. Until that day comes, Pakistan will continue to support insurgent groups in the tribal areas to gain perceived strategic advantage over India rather than being a constructive partner in counterinsurgency measures. In the process, Afghanistan will continue to burn.

However, the problem is that all of these proposals remain as politically unlikely as convincing Iran, China, India, and Russia to accept a greater stake in the Afghan question without major concessions. On balance, Tehran will continue to see a strengthened Taliban as a good means of undermining the US (despite having an emboldened Sunni group on its borders). The last thing Tehran would want is a stable Afghanistan and Iraq with large US troop contingents circling its borders, while support from Russia would depend on US concessions over a whole series of issues ranging from missile defense to Georgia. India will continue to provide ample aid to Afghanistan but as a means of countering Pakistan rather than stabilizing Kabul. China will remain cautious not to get dragged into the Afghan quagmire. At best, it might provide further development aid and offer civilian support to keep its toe in the water, but even then, this will only prevent the Taliban from creating difficulties among the Muslim Uighurs of Xinjiang province.

Strategic opportunity or last throw of the dice

Yet the one factor that could radically alter the strategic balance would be a rapid deterioration of Pakistan as a result of domestic turmoil and sharpened insurgency exported from the Afghan surge. China, India, Iran, and Russia would be far more likely to cooperate with Washington on the Afghan question if they saw any credible prospect of a nuclear-armed Pakistan falling into the hands of Islamic extremists. Clearly,

this cannot be the inadvertent "aim" of any Western policy, not least because the stability of Pakistan remains vastly more important than that of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of intersecting interests makes this issue a crucial one for the entire region.

For if the US starts to shift its focus towards Pakistan as its main strategic concern in South Asia by "downgrading" Afghanistan to a benign threat compared to growing international terrorism in Pakistan, this would not only open up greater political possibilities to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban, but it would also allow the US to proffer modest definitions of success. Rolling out "mission accomplished" banners might be a step too far, but as President Obama has made clear, stopping al-Qaida from launching attacks on the West is ultimately the overriding policy concern in the region.

This would of course be a chimera. Washington's road out of Kabul does not exclusively run through Islamabad. In the long term, the only real solution to political instability and associated terrorist threats in South Asia is one of comprehensive state-building measures both in Pakistan and Afghanistan; if nothing else, the terms set by Kabul have to be symmetric with those set by Islamabad if the Taliban are to be quelled. Lowering the bar of politically acceptable outcomes in one will inevitably raise it in the other.

The US will need to muster all the regional support it can get to allow for mutual gains rather than exclusive losses in South Asia and to maintain a strong, but discreet developmental presence under a UN flag. NATO will also need to help in this task, but unless political aspirations of a nascent Contact Group are matched to actual resources, the alliance could find its stature imperiled once more. It might not quite be the last throw of the dice in Afghanistan yet but if revised US strategy fails, our exit from Afghanistan will be ignominious.

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