

The Af-Pak Paradox

No Exit?

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There is a new acronym in the lexicon of Obama administration national security moguls. “AfPak” stands for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The term denotes the administration’s desire to take a unified approach to policy and strategy for these two countries. President Barack Obama correctly views them as the central front of the war on terrorism and — also accurately — sees so many aspects of the strategic problem of the Afghan war playing out in both countries that it is far more useful to consider them intertwined.

Obama entered the White House determined to pursue this conflict, having stated repeatedly that he would reinforce U.S. troops in Afghanistan. He also hinted at a more muscular CIA covert operation in the unacknowledged parallel war across the Pakistani border. Yet last week on the television show *Sixty Minutes*, Obama stepped back, declaring that there “has to be” an exit strategy for this war.

What’s going on here? Obama just made final decisions based upon the policy review he ordered at the beginning of his administration. He’ll carry this decision to a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Strasbourg, France, on April 3. The new president will try to resolve this paradox with European allies, but the contradictions of the new AfPak policy may well doom the enterprise.

Bush Legacy

As Obama came to the plate, NATO forces in Afghanistan were hard-pressed and losing ground to Taliban insurgents. The Bush years of the Afghan war were hollow, the campaign largely ignored despite the fact Bush had started it. The tide of disaster has been swelling since at least 2005. American battle casualties are running at a high rate — even though wintertime in the high plains is supposed to be the off-season for combat — and are on track to match or exceed those of 2008, the costliest year to date. Military commanders were promoting a “surge” along the lines of what took place in Iraq, adding 30,000 troops to the U.S. battle force. Obama approved 17,000, calling it a down payment on Afghan security, but rejected the full program.

The first brigade of reinforcements has already deployed. Two more brigades, completing the force, are slated to head for the war in the next few weeks. Obama’s latest decision includes adding 4,000 more Americans, specifically to train the Afghan army and police. Revitalization is also underway of civilian advisory efforts, aimed primarily at the Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

The United States provides the largest single component of the NATO army, which is called the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), as well as its own independent fighting

contingent in the form of a joint task force of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). The current CENTCOM commander, General David A. Petraeus, considered a wizard by the previous administration for turning Iraq around, has sent mixed signals. He reportedly leaked information on Obama's refusal to reinforce AfPak at the maximum rate in order to pressure the president to reverse himself. On the other hand, Petraeus supports opening talks with Taliban factions, along the lines of the tribal "awakening" in Iraq, so as to divide the enemy.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, a holdover from the Bush presidency, has already spent much of the past year encouraging NATO, with marginal results, to increase its commitment. Overall forces in Afghanistan have grown from about 47,000 to 55,000 over the last year without seeming to affect the war situation. But some key NATO allies have signaled their intent to leave the war. Others are under mounting pressure at home to do so. One of Obama's aims at the NATO summit is clearly to use the reinvigorated American focus to stem the erosion of international support.

Larger resources mean nothing, however, unless the strategy is right. The latest counterinsurgency approach embraces the very elements of nation-building and local development Bush rejected in his first presidential campaign, and eschewed until they seemed to succeed in Iraq under Petraeus. The current U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General David D. McKiernan, interviewed recently on Jim Lehrer's Newshour, said this of success in the Afghan morass: "It's going to take security, it's going to take governance, and it's going to take socioeconomic progress — all three of those in a comprehensive way."

This sounds good until you peel away the layers of the onion.

Peeling the Onion

The security outlook in Afghanistan is bleak no matter how you cut it. High casualty rates are merely one indicator. Attacks along the Ring Road, the national highway, are up 40% over 2007 rates. Engagements and terrorist incidents are unusually high for the off season, and a disturbing number have occurred around the Afghan capital. In early February, a series of simultaneous assaults and bombings on the Justice and Education ministries and a prison administration facility paralyzed Kabul for hours. In other incidents, car bombs rocked the German embassy and nearly destroyed the Indian embassy, kidnappers have seized diplomats, and gunmen have attacked neighborhoods housing the Afghan elite. Americans and ISAF personnel no longer dare make the 60-mile road trip between Bagram Air Base, the port of entry for Kabul, and the city itself, despite the presence of powerful U.S. units in both locations.

The centerpiece of security strategy is expansion of Afghan security forces. Obama's extra advisors will support a ramp up of the Afghan army to 134,000 (during their war in Afghanistan, the Soviets claimed to have built the local forces up to 130,000 but probably didn't put more than 60,000 Afghans under arms). A second problem — common to our effort in Iraq — is that troop units have been created without commensurate support forces, ensuring a need for U.S. or NATO "residual" forces even after the Afghan army is complete. At one point the bulk of Afghan troop increases for 2009 were slated for corps-level logistics units. As of last November, only seven Afghan battalions were rated as fully combat-capable. And the Afghans didn't have a national command center capable of communicating with field forces until late last year. A third issue goes to the pervasive corruption in

Afghanistan: The Government Accountability Office reported recently that more than 370,000 weapons supplied to the Afghans by the U.S. or NATO — 30-40% of the total — cannot be accounted for. In sum, the United States expects an infant military to take over the fight against the Taliban, with weaknesses that will inevitably necessitate foreign assistance.

Governance in Afghanistan is a thin reed in any U.S. strategy. President Hamid Karzai, beset with charges of ineffectiveness, corruption, and relations with those who meddle in drugs, is probably no longer a credible political figure in his country. There have been difficulties over the nation's planned election for this year, with voter registration running too slowly. Political cleavages in Kabul do not seem amenable to any immediate solution. Government administration is weak, almost absent in some parts of the country, and police forces, though strong in numbers (about 65,000), remain poorly trained and ineffective. Drug trafficking also contributes to undermining the system. The Afghan government is so little regarded that some ISAF commanders prefer to operate without reference to them.

The Seduction of Reconstruction

Nation-building and the socioeconomic aspects of counterinsurgency are the specialty of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and draw on the U.S. experience of "pacification" during the later years of the Vietnam War. The PRTs are building schools, digging wells, providing medical evaluations, and funding local development, but they labor under great burdens.

Afghanistan is suffering an acute food shortage. Farmers are diverting significant acreage to the growing of poppies. Agricultural production in 2008 was less than in 2001, the last year of Taliban rule. Unemployment stands at 40%, with 53% of the population under the poverty line. Foreign aid isn't turning the tide, with the one notable exception of the Ring Road, close to being reconstructed, and which may one day improve these conditions. Many efforts of the PRTs are presently focused on election preparations and on simply emplacing local government structures.

U.S. and ISAF military operations are destroying much of the goodwill earned by the PRTs. There has been a steady stream of incidents in which U.S. aircraft, supposedly targeting the Taliban, have harmed Afghan civilians. As a result, even President Karzai has denounced the air raids, which are an integral element of military action. Special operations forces conducting raids without coordinating with local authorities have also provoked negative reactions among Afghans.

The Problem of Pakistan

Meanwhile in Pakistan, the center of Taliban (and al-Qaeda) power lies beyond the reach of U.S. forces. An elaborate border surveillance network has attempted to impede insurgent infiltration into Afghanistan, but this is likely to be no more effective than similar American efforts in Vietnam or French ones in Algeria. Pressure on Pakistan to take action against the insurgents has had marginal payoff. Worse, the delicate balance of political forces in Pakistan militates against success in this area. Indeed there have been repeated — and increasingly more concrete — allegations that Pakistani intelligence is actually helping the Taliban. The CIA covert operation that has used armed drones to attack insurgent targets is worth a detailed investigation elsewhere, but here it is sufficient to say that this has become as controversial in Pakistan as are American air operations in Afghanistan. Leader "plinking"

is not going to win the Afghan war and may end up destabilizing a U.S. ally.

In short, AfPak poses a paradox for the Obama administration. No course presently on the table offers any sure way forward. Benchmarks aren't likely to be met, which will crystallize Obama's original doubts about an exit strategy. When that happens, the greater size of the U.S. military commitment, and the extremely limited capacity to transport forces into and out of Afghanistan, will make any withdrawal difficult if not impossible. This problem isn't going away; it's getting worse.

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