Afghanistan: Back To Basics

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As the conflict in Iraq winds down, the “forgotten front” of the War on Terror, Afghanistan, has moved back into the forefront of the national security debate. Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan (hereafter OEF) is aptly named, since the conflict has endured long into the next administration. Whoever takes the oath of office in January of 2009 will face the same types of challenges in Afghanistan that have bedeviled the current administration since 2001, and to an extent have been characteristic of Afghan politics for decades. The primary strategic challenge that the new administration will face is arriving at a definition of success—or perhaps victory—in Afghanistan similar to that used in Iraq, and seeking a means eventually to declare the mission accomplished and bring the troops home. This is unlikely to take place in the foreseeable future, however.

Seeking security

To an extent, the security equation in Afghanistan was defined by the success of the initial phase of OEF in the fall of 2001. The Taliban regime was ousted in short order, and replaced with a pro-Western transitional government that then embarked on what has been a fairly successful program to bring democracy to the country. This effort, bolstered by billions of dollars in U.S. and international aid, produced a government that enjoyed a great deal of popular support and a growing economy.

However, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups opposed to the government have not been wholly extinguished, and have continued to pursue their program of violence. There are currently two main sources of destabilization: the Taliban insurgency in the area around Kandahar and to the south, and a more complex insurgency of mixed foreign fighters, Taliban and Afghan and Pakistani groups—for example al-Qaeda, Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Talba, and Tehrik Nefaz-i-Shariat Muhammad—in the country’s east.[1]

These hotspots have seen greater levels of violence as the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan security forces have moved deeper into the insurgents’ sanctuaries, principally using U.S., British and Canadian troops. As a result of the increased activity, May 2008 was the first month since 2003 in which the Coalition lost more troops in Afghanistan than Iraq (23 and 21 deaths respectively) and June 2008 saw the deadliest month in Afghanistan ever for the United States.[2]

Even given the increase in U.S. and NATO casualties in 2008, there have been some positive signs. The year began without what had become the annual rite of a large-scale Taliban spring offensive. This may have been due in part to the costly failure of the 2007 offensive, brought about by successful preemption by NATO forces and political pressure from Pakistan.[3] The Taliban have instead focused on a combination of low-risk harassment attacks, such as with IEDs (which, despite the commonly accepted acronym, are increasingly Iranian-made and hardly “improvised”), and a series of dramatic terror attacks such as the January bombing of the Serena hotel in Kabul, the April 27th Victory Day parade attack, the June 13th mass breakout at the Sarposa prison in Kandahar, and the July 7th bombing outside the Indian Embassy in Kabul. The larger strategic value of these “spectaculars” is open to question, but they have kept the insurgency in the headlines and helped boost insurgent morale.

When possible, the insurgents have sought to engage Afghan forces rather than those of the ISAF. The development of the Afghan National Security Forces (the ANSF, composed of the Afghan National Army and police forces) has been a central effort in OEF. The stated objective is to develop a “professional, capable, respected, multi-ethnic ANSF, with competent ministries and staffs and sustaining institutions, capable of directing, planning, commanding, controlling, training and supporting the ANSF.”[4] The forces are held in high regard by the Afghan people (unlike the tribal and sectarian militia groups). Yet progress has been inconstant, particularly with respect to the police. It would be unwise to begin discussing drawing down U.S. and NATO forces until the Afghan security forces can operate on a largely independent basis, and the next U.S. administration must pledge itself to maintaining this critical pillar of the counterinsurgency and development effort.

A separate but important element of the security situation is the prevalence of inter-tribal warfare of the sort that Afghans have experienced for centuries. These violent outbreaks do not fit neatly into NATO’s security equation. For example, in the summer of 2007 Pashtun nomads known as Kuchis forced out over 20,000 Hazara villagers in the Behsud District of Wardak Province, and caused $212 million in damage. This incident has caused tensions between President Karzai and his Second Vice President, Karim Khalili. Khalili, a Hazara leader, has been dissatisfied with Karzai’s response to the incident—something that could create problems for Karzai’s reelection effort. As well, opportunistic insurgent groups may find ways to exploit these and other tensions to create further instabilities. Afghanistan’s numerous and timeless tribal rivalries cannot and should not be the central focus of the U.S./NATO effort. But because they can precipitate circumstances in which the U.S. may become involved, they bear close watching.
A Pentagon report from the summer of 2008 described the situation in the country as “fragile” while also noting the success of the U.S./NATO counte...
**An economic tango**

Afghanistan’s economy has stabilized and seen some degree of annual growth, due in large part to international development aid and the fact that the baseline reached under Taliban rule was so low. This growth is likely to continue, spurred chiefly by the construction sector. Afghanistan also has underutilized natural gas deposits that have become more valuable as global energy prices have increased. Figures from 2006 showed 47.53 billion cubic meters of proven natural gas reserves, a small amount by Middle Eastern standards but an important potential source of revenue in an otherwise poor country. The planned Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline, which is envisioned to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to India, could help spur development of the natural gas sector in Afghanistan. However the project has been frequently stalled by security concerns, and there is no reliable timeline as to its completion. The immediate downside of the increase in energy costs for Afghanistan is direct and indirect contributions to inflation, which is estimated at 17 percent, with higher food costs a major and potentially destabilizing factor.

International aid efforts remain robust. The United States has spent over $6 billion in aid programs since 2001 (the largest portions going to road construction and power generation), and $20 billion was pledged at the June 2008 international aid conference in Paris. However, this aid has had some negative effects. The influx of foreign assistance has created unrealistic and long-term unsustainable fiscal policies. Increases in operating expenses since 2003 have outstripped domestic revenue growth, creating widening budget deficits. The Afghan government plan to close its operating budget deficit originally projected for 2009-10 has been pushed back to 2012-13.[15] The international aid community meanwhile is put in the difficult position of having to argue for increasing discipline and fiscal restraint on the part of the Afghan government while simultaneously providing increasing outlays of aid money. This is not a recipe for success in any democracy, but there seem to be few other viable alternatives.

Nor is aid evenly distributed throughout the country—a function primarily of the relative influence of provincial and tribal leaders in Kabul. Western attempts to force equity on the distribution of aid are unlikely to achieve the desired outcome, and an argument can be made that while aid does not reach all of the people it needs to in order to achieve the desired development objectives, it does tend to channel funds informally in ways that achieve important political ends. That is, the informal distribution mechanisms give those with power and influence a greater stake in supporting the system that produces the aid dollars.

The efforts of the 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan have been largely successful in promoting development in the areas where they have been active. The close coordination of military and civilian teams stands as a model for future efforts. Nevertheless there are limits to the number of teams that can be deployed, and some question as to whether the gains achieved in areas in which the PRTs are active can be sustained once they are removed.

An important issue at the nexus between economic development and internal security is the cultivation of opium poppies. 2007 saw the largest poppy crop in Afghan history, and 2008 is on track to be another banner year, though probably not greater than 2007.[16] Afghanistan produces around 93 percent of the world’s opiates, and drugs account for half of the country’s real GDP.[17]

The United States has been an active proponent of vigorous poppy eradication, and has sometimes found itself at odds with the Karzai regime, which fears the U.S. approach would alienate too many people and is instead pursuing its own more low-key efforts.[18] The Afghan government claimed a degree of success in 2007, with production reduced in 23 out of 34 provinces, and 16 provinces poppy-free. UN figures showed a more modest 10 provinces in decline and 12 poppy-free, with the remaining 12 either stable (mostly at high levels) or increasing.[19]

There is a direct relationship between poppy cultivation and internal security problems. Insurgents benefit from the illicit trade through protection money paid by farmers and “donations” given to local insurgent leaders for transporting opiates through their territories. According to a UN study, poppy cultivation is on the decline where security is high. In Afghan villages in which the security situation is poor, 100 percent of the inhabitants cultivate poppies.[20] Poppy production is highest in the provinces south and west of Kandahar, and south of Jalalabad, both areas of insurgent support.

Almost half the production for the entire country—around 45 percent of global opium production—comes from Taliban-dominated Helmand Province.[21] Not surprisingly, Helmand has also seen by far the greatest level of insurgent violence in the past year. This poses problems, yet it also presents opportunities. Because poppies are grown in relatively isolated areas of the country, the number that would be affected by a more vigorous eradication effort would be small. Furthermore, these individuals are not likely to be regime supporters in the first place; they are already alienated. In the words of Australian counterterrorism expert David Kilcullen, “The largest pockets of cultivation—in rural northern Helmand province—are in the least populated areas of Afghanistan. The insurgency is where the people are, but the poppy is not.”[22]

**Porous borders**

Afghanistan will continue to face problems created by its lack of control over its international borders. Its eastern border with modern-day Pakistan has been a matter of contention dating back to the days of British India. Afghanistan has at times argued that the Pashtun tribes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were never legally incorporated into Pakistan, and that the international border does not apply to them. Yet it is the free cross-border transit of anti-government Pashtuns such as the Taliban that has allowed the insurgency to remain active in the mountainous border region, and claim sanctuary in Pakistan when convenient. As well, in recent years there has been no love lost between the Taliban and the Musharraf regime, though the extremists have been able to reach periodic agreements with Islamabad, much to Kabul’s detriment. An April 2008 cease-fire accord between the Taliban and Pakistan was credited with causing a spike in Taliban activity along the border area inside Afghanistan. President Karzai threatened possible cross-border intervention, and in June 2008 11 Pakistani border troops were mistakenly killed by ISAF air and artillery strikes during combat with insurgents who had fled across the border.

The border area is a haven for extremists, smugglers, gun runners and drug couriers. Yet it is also Afghanistan’s major trade and supply route, including the main overland supply line for ISAF forces in Afghanistan. Any attempt to completely seal the border would create severe local hardships and have greater negative economic effects on Afghanistan than could be made up for in improvements in the security realm.
Given the contentious relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, it has been difficult for the two countries to work cooperatively against the insurgency. As well, Pakistani officials have refused to allow U.S. forces to operate inside their country against terrorist networks and insurgent groups. But geography dictates that Pakistan must be part of any comprehensive security solution. One option is for NATO or other countries to pursue agreements with Pakistan to supply advisory and other support to Pakistani forces operating in the border areas. Australia’s defense minister, for example, has suggested that his country help “arm the Pakistani army with the skills and means to conduct counter-insurgency campaigns and civil operations,” assuming Pakistan will extend an invitation.[23] If Australia is not a politically acceptable partner, perhaps a Mideast regional state would be willing to assume the task, with back-end support from the U.S. or NATO.

Afghanistan’s western border, while the scene of less violence, has become problematic because of the growing influence of Iran. Western Afghanistan is a Shi’ite enclave in a country that is 80 percent Sunni. Iran has poured millions of dollars into local development projects, principally to the benefit of the Hazara Shi’ites in and around Herat. The scale of Iranian investments in Herat has led some locals to begin referring to their city as “Afghanistan’s Dubai.”[24] It is difficult for the United States to be openly critical of Iranian development efforts while at the same time seeking to increase the level of aid coming from other countries. President Karzai as well has been reluctant to draw attention to Iranian links to terror groups inside Afghanistan, stressing instead the positive role he would like to see Iran play in his country.

Yet Iran’s motives for becoming involved in Afghanistan are certainly not benign. Iran has an interest, as it has in Iraq, in keeping U.S. and NATO forces occupied and distracted. There have been periodic small-scale outbreaks of sectarian violence, which the Sunnis have blamed on Iranian influence. Iranian-made weapons have been found in the stockpiles of insurgent groups in other areas of the country.[25] While western Afghanistan does not yet represent a security challenge on the scale of the other regions noted above, it remains an area of concern. Iran possesses a latent surge capacity in the west that it could use to destabilize the country should the United States seek to pressure Iran on its nuclear program or other issues. Western Afghanistan represents a strategic investment for the Iranian regime that the United States has been either unable or unwilling to counter.

Keeping the faith

Policymakers must accept a degree of ambiguity when dealing with Afghanistan. The country will not fit easily into the established frameworks of political or economic development, nation-building or internal security. American interests in that country will only be realized when they are congruent with Afghan interests, and it is a mistake to take anything for granted when seeking common ground. Afghan political culture is Realist to an extent seldom found in the world, and interests—whether individual, tribal or regional—will always be paramount. So long as policymakers approach the Afghan puzzle with this in mind, their programs are more likely to succeed.

There are grounds for optimism. Afghanistan is a larger county than Iraq, with a larger population. It has sectarian and tribal divisions as deep as any found in Iraq, and a history of greater instability. The ISAF military footprint in the country has always been much smaller than that of the Coalition in Iraq. And yet the scope of insurgent violence there has never been as wide as that in Iraq, the government has been more stable, and the Afghan people more secure. The recent degradation in the security environment notwithstanding, OEF-Afghanistan has been a much greater success than it has been given credit for. An incoming American administration with radical plans to alter the status quo may do more harm than good.

The greatest fear in Afghanistan is one of abandonment. Afghanistan cannot currently defend itself from its internal and external adversaries without assistance. The Afghan people have seen the attention span of the West wane before, in the period following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989. The resulting inattention led to several years of sectarian fighting, followed by the original rise of the Taliban. The history of American pullouts in Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia has contributed to this sense of apprehension. The fact that the U.S. is changing presidents for the first time since the advent of the war will only add to the feelings of uncertainty. To counter this fear, the next American President must at the earliest opportunity publicly reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and pledge continuing military and economic support, for so long as the Taliban and foreign extremists pose a threat to the country and beyond.

The Afghan people have placed their trust and their future in the hands of the United States and the international community. In return, the next President must openly reaffirm our national commitment to this historic mission, for the sake of security and stability in that country, and in our own.

Notes:


2. This has as much, if not more, to do with the dramatically improved situation in Iraq than an upsurge of violence in Afghanistan.


10. This follows the classic Maoist model of insurgency, in which the final phase is conventional warfare.


12. The model for success would be the latter stages of the Vietnam War up to 1972, the high tide of Vietnamization. The model for failure is the final year of that war, when the United States withdrew critical matériel and air support for the South Vietnamese armed forces, and they were quickly overwhelmed by the North Vietnamese People’s Army.


