

U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

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Over the past two years, U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has produced laudable successes, including the destruction of the Taliban regime, the assumption of power by the more moderate Karzai government, and the repatriation of over 2 million Afghan refugees from neighboring countries. Afghanistan's most recent step forward has been the approval of a new constitution by the Loya Jirga this month, which should pave the way for presidential elections later this year. Yet, the situation today in Kabul and across the country remains fractured and fragile. Over the past six months, security has deteriorated significantly, with fully half of the country's 32 provinces in a state of semi-lawlessness. As the U.N. Special Representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, warned in his statement to the Loya Jirga after the approval of the constitution, "There is the insecurity that we don't see much of in the press: the fear that is in the heart of practically every Afghan because there is no rule of law yet in this country."

Recent strategic adjustments, such as the strengthening of the international security presence inside Afghanistan and a dramatic increase in reconstruction aid to the Kabul government, are promising. But these may be "too little, too late" to offset the initial U.S. reconstruction strategy that exacerbated, rather than addressed, Afghan complexities. In a mountainous country 50 percent larger than Iraq, with a population 16 percent greater than Iraq's, the United States has invested a mere fraction of the troops and reconstruction funds. It is clear that a limited approach simply cannot produce the stable, democratic Afghanistan that will increase U.S. national security and advance the war against terrorism.

At minimum, three questions – inconvenient though their answers might be – must be considered as the United States moves forward with adjustments to its Afghan plan:

- What U.S. military strategy best addresses both defensive, anti-insurgent priorities, and offensive, security-building needs?
- Are U.S. reconstruction plans targeted both to maximize positive short-term impacts on Afghanistan's economy and provide the foundation for sustainable economic development?
- Can the U.S.-favored plan for democratization and a strong central government overcome historical tendencies toward authoritarianism and localism in Afghanistan?

Security

U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan has emphasized a "light American footprint," which limits American forces on the ground to about 10,000 troops.

For the first year and a half following 9/11, the vast majority of the limited American forces were held to a strict mission of pursuing al-Qaeda and the Taliban, largely

avoiding “peacekeeping” or “nation-building” operations. This constrained the United States from providing security throughout the countryside, and ultimately, a “security gap” resulted. It was filled primarily by indigenous anti-Taliban forces (now numbering about 100,000) under the leadership of various warlords, who have returned to power at the local and regional level despite (and in some cases with the assistance of) the U.S. presence.

The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program aimed at the warlord militias is off to a slow start, and has yet to confront the major warlords who have heavy weapons. Ironically, a successful DDR program could further undermine the security situation if the United States and its allies cannot field another security force to fill the shoes of the demobilized militias.

Starting in December 2002, the Pentagon altered its views on peacekeeping and introduced Provincial Reconstruction Teams into Afghanistan. Thus far, only eight of these teams of 60-80 soldiers and civilians have been deployed to secondary cities and towns around the country, primarily in the more stable north, where they help to provide security and reconstruction work in provincial areas of operations.

In Kabul, security was greater due to the creation in December 2001 of the 5,000-man International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a multinational force. ISAF’s mandate and mission was kept quite limited by the U.S. until recently, when the Pentagon reversed itself and embraced an expanded mission under NATO command. Outside of Kabul, however, insecurity increased dramatically during 2003 throughout Afghanistan, as resurgent Al-Qaeda, neo-Taliban, drug smugglers, warlord factions, and anti-regime spoilers all undermined stability. Hundreds of American and international troops, Afghan government forces, international aid workers, and Afghan citizens have been killed or wounded in the past year. Several provinces along the Pakistani border have all but fallen outside of Kabul’s control, forcing the suspension or curtailing of reconstruction activities there. Despite enhanced border patrols by Pakistan’s military and repeated combat sweeps by American forces, these areas remain very dangerous.

Neither the planned expansion of NATO-led ISAF forces outside of Kabul, nor the Afghan National Army (ANA) provide a solution to the growing lawlessness and insurgency of Afghanistan. NATO has been lukewarm about its expanded role in Afghanistan, and preparation of an ANA combat-ready force that could confront the Afghan militias has been very slow. More American forces will have to deploy into the dangerous southern and eastern provinces, both to fight insurgents and to facilitate the reconstruction of those areas, which in turn can help lay the foundation for increased support for the Kabul government among local populations.

The Pentagon must find a way to put another division of American forces into Afghanistan in 2004, probably by drawing from among National Guard combat forces. These troops would fill an additional six Provincial Reconstruction Teams, provide maneuver battalions in the Pashtun provinces, help patrol the roads, and help nudge the warlords into demobilizing their militias.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction of Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure and transition away from a "war economy" built on narcotics, weapons, and smuggling is a second critical element of stabilizing the nation. More than 20 years of continuous war have left the country with little capacity for redevelopment. Immediately following the fall of the Taliban, an influx of nearly 2 million returning Afghan refugees necessitated diversion of initial reconstruction aid to relief and resettlement, and precious time was lost for the reconstruction effort.

President Bush's April 2002 rhetoric about a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan was not matched by funding—indeed, his budget submission to Congress in January 2003 contained no funding for Afghan reconstruction, requiring face-saving supplemental appropriation requests later in 2003. Even last November's massive \$87 billion appropriation for Iraq and Afghanistan earmarked only \$1.6 billion to Afghan reconstruction. As of June 2003, only 16 percent of reconstruction aid had passed through the Kabul government, and less than 10 percent of money pledged had gone into completed projects. Most aid money went through lending agencies to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and contractors, with high administrative and overhead costs eating up large amounts of the money earmarked for reconstruction. As a result, little money has ended up in Afghan hands and few continuing jobs have been created.

In the absence of a reconstruction push during 2002 and most of 2003, and with a dysfunctional economy that has little structural foundation for export production, Afghans have returned to opium production with a vengeance. Afghanistan has produced bumper crops for the past two years, and is now supplying 80 percent of the European heroin market and virtually all of the increasing demand in Pakistan, Central Asia, and within Afghanistan itself.

Micro-loans, funding of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (whose monies are used to pay government salaries, among other things), and major impact projects (like "Ring Road" construction), all must be priorities, rather than the constant dilution of aid by its funneling through thousands of disparate NGO projects. Job and scholarship creation to support DDR efforts, electricity generation, and health care projects should also be priorities. Most importantly, the United States must follow its late 2003 supplemental funding with at least another \$1.5 billion in the FY 2005 budget, in order to maintain momentum in Afghanistan's reconstruction. In addition, more pressure needs to be brought to bear on other countries to live up to their assistance pledges.

Governance

The 9/11 attacks on the United States were made possible in part by state failure in Afghanistan, which had allowed a group like the Taliban to first come to power and then give haven to terrorist groups like al Qaeda. In light of this, creating good governance in Afghanistan, providing a representative voice for the Afghan people, and reversing state failure is critical for U.S. policy.

The Bonn Accords provide the mechanism through which governance is to be established in Afghanistan and lay out a transition process that first invested power in an Interim Authority of anti-Taliban Afghans (January to June 2002), headed by Hamid Karzai. A *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly) met in June 2002 to select a Transitional Administration, also headed by Karzai. A second *Loya Jirga* met in December 2003 to approve a constitution for the country. Following the approval of that constitution this January, national elections are scheduled for the summer of 2004.

The new constitution is centered on a strong president, who will have the power to dismiss ministers and the legislature. Centralizing power is strongly favored by Karzai, who believes it is the best way to wrest control from the hands of the factional leaders and warlords. However, a more decentralized, federal system that attempts to accommodate entrenched warlords while transforming them into more legitimate political actors would be a more effective and sustainable political formula.

Another major political question that was on display at the constitutional Loya Jirga is the ongoing debate over whether conservative Islamic law will dominate Afghan society. Enduring divisions between modernizers and traditionalists appear to have sharpened during Afghanistan's long war, such that the new constitution and elections to follow will probably produce governments whose policies toward women and minorities more closely resemble those of the Taliban than of the United States.

While women's rights and representation were secured in this constitution, which also went a long way toward assuaging the concerns of minority ethnic groups, the constitution may ultimately prove to be worthless, if the Kabul government cannot enforce its provisions throughout the country.

The underlying problem is that ethnic-linguistic-religious divisions have hardened due to the long years of civil war. The Taliban were drawn heavily from the Pashtun ethnic group, Afghanistan's largest group, located in the south and east and straddling the porous border with Pakistan. The anti-Taliban forces were primarily a fractious alliance from minority ethnic groups based in the center and north of the country, especially the Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek.

The government headed by Karzai, who is a leading Pashtun, is composed primarily of northern minority ethnic leaders, thus alienating many Pashtun tribesmen. Moreover, the formula for state-rebuilding has been weighted toward creating a strong central government in a country that has resilient local political actors (the powerful warlords) and traditions.

The United States seems to have little leverage over these political decisions, in part because the Bonn Accords and "light footprint" strategy empowered a whole range of Afghan political actors, most of whom are not especially "moderate" nor conversant with the tolerance required for democracy to function.

Conclusion

Following the successful military campaign in Afghanistan, the United States embarked on a strategy in Afghanistan that has failed to achieve our core goals. We have not captured or killed Osama bin Laden, head of al Qaeda, nor Mullah Mohammed Omar, head of the Taliban. Nor did we provide a rapid return to security, as the steady number of attacks throughout 2003 indicated; good governance, as the resilience of the powerful warlords continues to illustrate; or infrastructure reconstruction and economic development, which is only now beginning to be of a magnitude to make a noticeable impact.

A flawed initial strategy followed by lackluster commitment to nation-building in Afghanistan has squandered an opportunity to get nation-building right, and entangled the United States in a messy, virtually insoluble situation. The problems are so interlinked that solutions that focus on only one policy pillar are doomed to fail.

For American policy in Afghanistan to have any hope of success, however, our number one priority must be to close the security gap. This means the warlord militias must be reduced, the Afghan National Army and security forces must be augmented and/or the U.S. and NATO forces must be increased. The major opponents to the Kabul government, including warlords, drug-traffickers and Taliban, must be sidelined. Enhanced security will make possible the delivery of desperately needed reconstruction and development assistance into the contested rural areas, strengthening the legitimacy of the Kabul government. Greater security will also allow more moderate political forces to emerge.

Realistically, only the United States has the necessary muscle to close the security gap in Afghanistan during 2004 and must deploy the additional troops and adjust their missions in order to do so. Time is running out in Afghanistan, and American failure there would once again make the United States vulnerable to catastrophic attack.

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