

FUMBLING THE GREAT GAME: THE CHALLENGES FACING NATO'S MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, Afghanistan has been the central battleground in the “Great Game” among the world’s major powers. The players, rules, and objectives have changed since the original struggle between Britain and Russia for control of Central Asia, but the Game continues to be played.¹ After the traumatic attacks of September 11, the United States launched a war on Afghanistan to wipe out the al-Qaeda terrorist network and to overthrow the Taliban government that sheltered it. Under the Bush administration, the goal of the war was to replace the Taliban with Western-style democratic institutions, but establishing a functioning democracy proved more challenging than anticipated. Nearly eight years later, US forces are still in Central Asia, struggling to suppress a Taliban insurgency that has spilled over the border into Pakistan.

Having inherited these difficulties, the Obama administration’s first initiative was to reassess the war’s objectives. On 27 March 2009, President Barack Obama announced that rather than exporting democracy, his administration’s goal will be to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future,” essentially redefining the aims of the US mission.² While the President is correct to look beyond the fighting in Afghanistan and to call for a regional approach, his goals can only be achieved if the United States and NATO/ISAF unify their efforts and properly resource their operations.

The Bush Administration’s Game Plan

The Bush administration sought to combat the threat of terrorism by actively supporting democratic governments and by replacing dictatorships with democratic regimes. The rationale for this strategy was that the newly democratic countries would breed less terrorism, since their citizens would enjoy greater freedom and would thus be more inclined to be peaceful.³ President Bush memorably enunciated this notion in a January 2004 speech at National Defense University, when he declared: “The defense of freedom requires the advance of freedom.”⁴

However, eight years after US and NATO forces forced the Taliban and al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan, a violent insurgency is gaining ground on both sides of the border. Four years after Afghanistan’s first presidential election, the increasingly besieged

¹ Milton Bearden. “Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires.” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2001). Available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/57411/milton-bearden/afghanistan-graveyard-of-empires>

² The White House. *A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Washington DC, 27 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>

³ Natan Shatansky. *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

⁴ George W. Bush. “President Discusses War on Terror.” National Defense University, Washington DC, 8 March 2005. Available at: <http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/syria/WH/20050308-3.pdf>

government of Hamid Karzai is losing credibility domestically and internationally.⁵ The government of neighbouring Pakistan, entangled in a variety of political crises, has been unable to retain control of its own territory and population.

The Bush administration's efforts to establish a stable democracy in Afghanistan were unsuccessful for several reasons. First, US attempts at nation-building were shallow and ineffective. After the initial invasion, a UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was deployed to Kabul to manage reconstruction.⁶ Lacking funds and political support, the ISAF made only limited progress and by the spring of 2003 there was a revival in Taliban activity. The Bush administration, focused on the invasion of Iraq, failed to allocate sufficient resources to Afghanistan to effectively counter the resurgent Taliban.

Second, US diplomacy was paralyzed by the rhetoric of Global War on Terror, a zero-sum struggle in which other actors were "with us or with the terrorists."⁷ Such rhetoric thwarted rigorous strategic thinking by aggregating opponents into a homogenous "terrorist" enemy. Only by distinguishing political opponents of the United States from global terrorists such as al-Qaeda and engaging all potential interlocutors can the United States make its nation-building project workable and focus its resources on undermining international terrorist networks.

Third, the Bush administration's counterinsurgent measures were aimed overwhelmingly at Afghanistan and did not address the deteriorating situation in Pakistan. Conditions in Pakistan allowed the United States' opponents to use its terrain as a base to rebuild their strength, rendering a democratic Afghanistan perpetually out of reach.

By the end of President Bush's term in office, his administration had begun to recognize at least some of these problems. Four months before the President left office, his top aides conducted a major review of the war strategy and overall mission in Afghanistan, which emphasized the deteriorating security situation in neighbouring Pakistan.⁸ However, no move was made towards limiting the goals of the mission to make them more manageable.

Obama Enters Play

When Barack Obama assumed office, his administration, concerned that the adjustments made at the end of the Bush presidency had been overtaken by changes on the ground, undertook a fresh review of the United States' Afghan policy. On 27 March 2009, President Obama announced the outline of a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan which restricted the focus to the defeat of al-Qaeda, but emphasized looking beyond the fighting in Afghanistan and linked Afghanistan and Pakistan together. Like Iraq, the goal of the war now is "sufficiency" – enough stability and

⁵ Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid. "From Great Game to Grand Bargain." *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2009). Available at: <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/pdfs/RubinRashidFORREIGN%20AFFAIRSfinal.pdf>

⁶ Ahmed Rashid. *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. New York: Viking, 2008, p. 349.

⁷ VOA News. "Bush: 'You Are Either With Us, Or With the Terrorists,'" Voice of America, 21 September 2001.

⁸ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker. "Bush Administration Reviews Its Afghanistan Policy, Exposing Points of Contention." *New York Times*, September 22, 2008. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/washington/23policy.html>

security to exclude Jihadist elements from power.⁹ More expansive development goals may be possible in the medium or long term, but as even the most limited victory is uncertain, setting broader goals outside the key elements of governance must be the focus of future Afghan efforts, not current US and NATO strategy.

The White Paper was careful to correct for the major failing of the Bush administration. President Obama pledged to devote greater US resources to the region, while calling for the expansion of Afghanistan's forces to take over security operations from the United States and NATO and for the expansion of counternarcotics efforts.¹⁰ He has also indicated that he will reach out to moderate elements of the Taliban.¹¹ Finally, the President declared that the US would treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries but one challenge and would make significant increases in US and international support to Pakistan for the fight against al-Qaeda.¹² Part of the strategy also focused on pursuing intensive regional diplomacy involving all key players in South Asia, including Iran and India.

Can these goals be achieved? According to Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the answer is “yes, provided that the mission is defined in realistic and practical terms.”¹³ NATO/ISAF and the US can only succeed if they focus effectively on the immediate task of providing security and defeating the insurgency. They must integrate their limited resources on a national level to directly support its immediate efforts to “shape, clear, hold, and build.” They cannot achieve the mission if they set unrealistic goals or under-resource their efforts – exactly the mistakes that the Bush administration made.

However, the situation is complicated by the lack of unity of effort within NATO/ISAF, UNAMA, and other aid donors: “unity of effort is now an empty slogan in far too many areas where the real world efforts are stovepiped, uncoordinated, and lack measures of effectiveness.”¹⁴ NATO/ISAF needs plans with commonly defined objectives and an integrated civil-military strategy, in addition to sufficiently resourcing the operations.

Another Surge?

The success of the insurgency is largely due to the fact that the US and NATO/ISAF effort has been badly under-resourced for the last eight years.¹⁵ The Obama administration seeks to rectify

⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman. *Is the Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict Winnable? The Broader Strategic Context*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC. 12 March, 2009.

¹⁰ The White House. *A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Washington DC, 27 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>

¹¹ Helene Cooper and Sheryl Gay Stolberg. “Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of the Taliban.” *New York Times*, 7 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama.html>

¹² The White House. *A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Washington DC, 27 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>

¹³ Anthony H. Cordesman. *Is the Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict Winnable? The Broader Strategic Context*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC. 12 March, 2009.

¹⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Afghanistan Campaign: Can We Win?* Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC (22 July 2009).

¹⁵ Erin Fitzgerald and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Resourcing for Defeat: The Critical Failures in Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Resourcing the Afghan and Iraq Wars*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC (6 August 2009).

this with a large increase in troop levels. Under General Stanley McChrystal, who replaced General David McKiernan in May 2009, the United States will dispatch another 17,000 soldiers to the volatile southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, as well as an additional 4,000 troops to train Afghan security forces.¹⁶ These reinforcements will bring the total US forces in Afghanistan to approximately 60,000, with NATO countries providing another 30,000 soldiers.

These increases have had promising early results; however, Afghanistan's rough terrain and extremely limited infrastructure still pose significant obstacles to US and NATO operations.¹⁷ The Soviet Union had 120,000 troops in the country for most of its occupation from 1979 to 1989, but still lost.¹⁸ After-action assessments of the Soviet failure concluded that about 500,000 troops would have been needed to "pacify" Afghanistan.¹⁹ NATO/ISAF and the United States should keep these lessons of history in mind when planning their force deployments.

Furthermore, "shape, clear, hold, and build" involve new forms of war fighting where force requirements cannot be predicted with precision. Force requirements may be increased by "new insurgent tactics and added foreign volunteers, instability in Pakistan, and the lack of adequate civilian partners and capability."²⁰ Success in the mission will therefore require adequate forces and funding for as long as the war lasts. Therefore, as the only NATO/ISAF nation with the capacity to deploy and to sustain large numbers of additional combat troops, the United States should be ready to deploy at least three to six more brigade combat teams in the coming year.

At the same time, other NATO/ISAF nations should maintain their current forces, without setting a cap on force levels until it is clear what forces are required. Most importantly, they should reduce or eliminate national caveats and restrictions on their forces wherever possible. The United States should not bear the burden of the war alone.

Building Up the Afghan National Security Forces

As in any counterinsurgency, the NATO/ISAF and the United States cannot succeed alone. Their success will ultimately depend on how well and how quickly they build up a larger and more effective ANSF first to support, then to take the lead, and eventually to replace NATO/ISAF forces. However, both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) must improve dramatically in size and capability before they can take the lead in Afghan security. NATO/ISAF should immediately begin to "support and resource NTM-A/ CSTC-A plans and the baseline for further expansion of the ANA and ANP as goals for 2014."²¹ These plans would nearly double the ANA and ANP, making them a more effective force in the fight against al-Qaeda and in creating the requisite level of security for development projects.

¹⁶ The White House. *A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Washington DC, 27 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>

¹⁷ Kimberly Kagan, "In Afghanistan, New Team Faces Daunting Challenges," *Washington Examiner*, 26 May 2009.

¹⁸ Steve Coll. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 50.

¹⁹ Scott R. McMichael. *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan*. London: Brassey, 1991, p. 89.

²⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Afghanistan Campaign: Can We Win?* Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC (22 July 2009).

²¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Afghanistan Campaign: Can We Win?* Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC (22 July 2009).

Tribal and local security forces can also play a useful role. In Wardack province, the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3) has shown early signs of success. A collaborative effort between the Afghan government and NATO forces to train locals as law enforcement officers, the AP3 aims to instruct local authorities to deny refuge to insurgents in regions where the ANSF cannot reach.²² If the program continues to yield good results, it may serve as a model that can be replicated in other provinces. However, NATO/ISAF must be cognizant that Afghanistan's tribal and regional differences may mean that it does not work in every area and needs to be carefully tailored to local conditions.

Improving Afghan Governance

In the business of counterinsurgency, security requires more than just extra forces. It means giving Afghans reasons to reject the insurgents by providing economic opportunities and government services. Yet, corruption and abuses by power brokers are so pervasive that they have widely discredited the Afghan national government, while many of Afghanistan's municipalities lack effective governance, services, and justice systems.²³ These pose serious problems for the defeat of al-Qaeda.

NATO/ISAF and the United States must make concerted efforts to give the Afghan government the necessary legitimacy and capacity at the national, provincial, and local levels. They must work with Afghan officials to reduce corruption in the government and to create levels of government services so necessary to sustain security and stability. Only then can the counterinsurgency effort succeed.

Engaging the Taliban

The Obama administration has also started to reclassify its adversaries in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan. While al-Qaeda terrorists remain firmly among the enemies of the United States, Obama's policy leaves room to distinguish between the various factions of the Taliban. Instead of approaching the insurgents as a homogenous group, Obama seeks to separate Islamist movements with local or national objectives from those that seek to attack the United States and NATO/ISAF directly. He has suggested initiating a reconciliation process in which the American military would reach out to moderate elements of the Taliban, much as it did with Sunni militias in Iraq. This strategy peeled many Iraqi insurgents away from the hard-line elements of al-Qaeda and did as much to turn the war around as the increase of American forces.²⁴ Obama feels that there is potential to replicate this success in Afghanistan.

Any agreement would likely consist of a Taliban commitment to prevent the use of Afghan territory for international terrorism in exchange for an end to hostile military action from the

²² Lt. Christopher Stachura. "Afghan Leaders, U.S. Soldiers Initiate Public Protection Program." US Department of Defense, Wardack, Afghanistan, 13 May 2009. Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=54332>

²³ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Afghanistan Campaign: Can We Win?* Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC (22 July 2009).

²⁴ Helene Cooper and Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of the Taliban." *New York Times*, 7 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/us/politics/08obama.html>

United States and NATO.²⁵ This entails the risk that the Taliban will return to power in Afghanistan, at least at the local level. Ahmed Rashid and Barnett Rubin have argued that “talking with Taliban fighters or other insurgents does not mean replacing Afghanistan's constitution with the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, closing girls' schools, or accepting other retrograde social policies.”²⁶ Rashid and Rubin make an important point – whatever weaknesses the Afghan government and security forces may have, Afghan society is appreciably stronger and more prepared to defend itself against such repressive ideologies than it was eight years ago.²⁷

The Pakistan Factor

Even the most successful strike on al-Qaeda or the Taliban present hierarchy will have only tactical value unless the conditions that have allowed Jihadist elements to repeatedly recreate themselves from 2001 to 2009 can be ended.²⁸ The key to this can be found in Pakistan. Believing that they faced an existential threat from India, the Pakistani security establishment attempted to use religious extremists as proxies against India. This plan backfired and the extremist forces spun out of control, creating conditions for the Taliban and al-Qaeda to take shelter in the FATA and Baluchi border areas.

Pakistan is reluctantly attempting to combat a Taliban insurgency in its Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). However, it is unlikely to eliminate the Islamist proxies unless the basic concerns of threats to its survival and territorial integrity are addressed. The Pakistani army’s determination not to get dragged further into a war against the Taliban was demonstrated in February 2009 by its inaction during the surrender of the government in Swat valley to 2500 Taliban led by Mullah Fazlullah.²⁹

According to the recent Asia Society Task Force report, the way ahead lies through “regional efforts to address Pakistan’s security concerns about its borders and by attempting to wean away the moderate Taliban.”³⁰ For this reason, the Obama administration has attached great significance to separating the moderate Taliban from the hardliners and offering them a political settlement. If it can accomplish this, then the United States will effectively fracture the Taliban movement in Pakistan and will seriously undermine al-Qaeda.

²⁵ Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid. “From Great Game to Grand Bargain.” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2009). Available at: <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/pdfs/RubinRashidFORREIGN%20AFFAIRSfinal.pdf>

²⁶ Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid. “From Great Game to Grand Bargain.” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2009). Available at: <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/pdfs/RubinRashidFORREIGN%20AFFAIRSfinal.pdf>

²⁷ Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid. “From Great Game to Grand Bargain.” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2009). Available at: <http://www.pacificcouncil.org/pdfs/RubinRashidFORREIGN%20AFFAIRSfinal.pdf>

²⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman. *Is the Afghanistan-Pakistan Conflict Winnable? The Broader Strategic Context*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC. 12 March, 2009.

²⁹ Kamran Rehmat. “Swat: Pakistan's lost paradise.” *Al Jazeera*, Islamabad: 27 January 2009. Available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/01/200912512351598892.html>.

³⁰ Asia Society. “Back from the Brink: A Strategy for Stabilizing Afghanistan-Pakistan.” Washington DC, April 2009. Available at: <http://www.asiasociety.org/taskforces/afpak/Afghanistan-PakistanTaskForce.pdf>

Conclusion: The End of the Game?

Obama's new, more focused objectives are conceptually more achievable, but realistically, the mission will only be achieved if NATO/ISAF and the United States unify their efforts and properly resource their operations. In this sense, Obama's announcement of the new strategy was a bit premature. Given that Pakistan was acting as a sanctuary for jihadist movements, action had to be taken immediately to deal with the 2009 campaign season in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the necessary planning and budgeting is still incomplete. White House National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones has stated that it is unlikely that the necessary elements to deal with the "AfPak conflict" – and metrics to measure success – can be put into place before 2011.³¹ Therefore, before we can assess whether the new goals are an improvement, we must wait to see how the White Paper translates into tangible changes on the ground.

There is room for optimism, however. The unity of effort between the United States and NATO/ISAF is improving. NATO recently approved a reorganization of its command structure in Afghanistan to better coordinate the war. It agreed to establish a new Intermediate Joint Headquarters in Kabul under American Lieutenant General David Rodriguez to manage the day-to-day war. General Rodriguez will also continue to report to the top American military commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, establishing a more direct link between the two camps.

Moreover, Obama has not thus far mentioned a US exit strategy. This is a wise move, for one of the basic premises of irregular warfare is that the insurgent can win simply by outlasting the larger, conventional force. If the United States were to declare an exit strategy up front, it would only play to those instincts and make the already long odds of success even longer. Thus, while it may be difficult at this point to assess the merits of Obama's redefinition of the rules of the Great Game, observers can at least be encouraged that his administration understands the odds it faces.

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³¹ Gen. James L. Jones. "US National Security: The Obama Approach." The Atlantic Council, Washington DC, 27 May 2009.