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The Lion and the Sheep:
Ending the war in Afghanistan

The security of the world depends on a stable and friendly regime in Afghanistan. Afghanistan sits at the cross roads of Europe and Asia and has been fought over for centuries due to its key geopolitical location. With the renewed international commitment to Afghanistan, the world is presented with the opportunity to finally bring a lasting peace to the country. Afghanistan demonstrated that if a failed state is left to its own devices it can become a direct threat to Western interests; this is a situation which cannot be allowed to reoccur. Politically, the centuries of conflict have left the country fractured and its current borders are a relic of British Imperialism which did not respect tribal boundaries. There has never been a powerful federal government in Afghan history that has been able to survive for long, but that is what the international community hopes to create in Afghanistan. These dreams will require tremendous resources to actualize. Afghanistan will always pose a threat to international peace and security if a solution to its chronic instability and underdevelopment is not found. If the international community pulls out too early, there no doubt that Afghanistan will be a burden for future generations as it has become for us.

Now that the importance of the mission in Afghanistan has been briefly addressed, there are two questions that have plagued policy makers and confounded the general public since the end of the original mission to remove the Taliban from power: what are the goals in Afghanistan and how do we obtain them? There are three goals that are generally regarded as the current objectives for a successful mission in Afghanistan. The international community and the Afghan government need to cooperate to develop Afghan security forces as well as increase the capacity of the government to meet the basic needs of its citizens. Secondly, the overall aim of increasing Afghan capacity would be to ensure that Afghanistan develops into a stable, friendly state in Central Asia and can never again be a home to international terrorism. Finally, foreign forces need to get out of the country as safely and quickly as possible and turn over security to the Afghans themselves. The development of democracy, while important to developing long term stability should not be regarded as a pressing issue, in the short term the focus needs to be on

increasing security, especially in the south and east of the country. All of these goals are mutually reinforcing and overlap but so far effectively implementing them has proved elusive.

One main military strategy has dominated the foreign engagement in Afghanistan for the last seven years: the minimalist approach. The initial campaign against the Taliban in 2001 used US Special Forces and air assets in coordination with allied militias to rout the Taliban from most of the country in two months. The coalition forces easily overpowered the Taliban in conventional battle, the Taliban ran to escape into the mountains of Eastern Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Western Pakistan. With the easy victory, it seemed that the minimalist strategy had been the correct approach in “pacifying” Afghanistan. Furthermore, there have never been a large number of troops deployed to Afghanistan due to the fear of being bogged down in a country which has a history of protracted and costly foreign engagements. The willingness of donors to promise billions of dollars in aid and resources to develop the country is a sharp contrast to the unwillingness to send troops. Many nations fear the risk of casualties that come with operating in high risk environments such as Afghanistan.

Nevertheless the initial strategy had a disastrous effect in allowing the Taliban the breathing room to rearm and reorganize for a sustained insurgency. After the initial victory against the Taliban in 2001, it appeared that the Taliban were routed and that they would no longer be an organized threat. However, this was not the case, the threat that Taliban attacks pose to the lives of ordinary Afghan civilians has progressively grown in the last seven years since the initial route in 2001. As Iraq shifted the world’s attention, Afghanistan was left on the back burner, allowing the Taliban to regroup and rearm. Although not a homogenous group, the Taliban have been able to extend control to broad parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many ordinary citizens grumble that at least when the Taliban was in control they had security, now Afghan citizens do not even have that.

On the development front, Afghanistan continues to place last on many of the standard of living indices and there is a growing disenchantment with the ineffectiveness and corruption within the Afghan government. The Taliban are not the only existential threat to Afghanistan, the level of criminality and corruption in all levels of government threatens to undermine ordinary Afghan support for the entire mission. This problem is often compounded by the international community who often run overlapping programs to the Afghan government and to each other

leading to a horrifically inefficient use of resources. Many of the reports dealing with the issue of Afghanistan call for increased coordination and cooperation between international and domestic agencies to reduce the level of the duplication of services. These calls have only recently been taken seriously with the renewed focus brought by the election of Barrack Obama.

The administration of Barrack Obama has brought Afghanistan back into focus both in the United States and on the world stage. The recent troop surge in Afghanistan is a promising sign that the Americans are serious about finishing the mission in Afghanistan and are willing to pay, in lives if necessary, to achieve that mission. With renewed American commitment, Washington increased the pressure on European capitals to ensure that they match the increased American contribution. The opportunity presented by the increase in American forces cannot be wasted and the area under control by coalition and government forces needs to be expanded. The expansion of the writ of the Afghan government as well as their capacity to provide basic services and security remains the only way to meet the long term threat of the insurgency.

A radical new approach needs to be taken in dealing with the insurgency in Afghanistan. Firstly, the Coalition needs to increase troops and equipment dramatically and rapidly to get the greatest possible force multiplier from the American troop surge. This needs to coincide with a renewed public commitment to the overall mission in Afghanistan by the coalition partner's political leaders. With this build up of forces and political commitment, the preparations for a large scale offensive against the Taliban can begin, along with a parallel offensive by the Pakistani's on their side of the border. The goal of this strategy would be to squeeze the Taliban on both sides of the border to ensure that the Taliban are crippled as much as possible to avoid the same situation as after the fall of 2001.

This strategy has been tried before in Afghanistan, such as Operation Anaconda, but this time a carrot needs to be offered as well as a stick. Money and a piece of land to any Taliban fighter that gives up his gun, along with the commitment from the former insurgent to remain on that land for ten years after which a larger sum is given to him if he does not help the insurgency in any way. For the leaders of the Taliban there are three ways of pacifying the threat, pay them off and/or offer them a share in political power in return for supporting the government or death.

Troops are not the only issue that has plagued the mission in Afghanistan; political support has waxed and waned over the years. Barrack Obama and his envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, have made new calls for a larger European contribution to the war in Afghanistan. These calls have caused friction between Washington and European capitals who do not want to feel pressured into fighting in “America’s War on Terror.” Germany and France have been especially resistant to sending their troops to the war torn South and have placed caveats on the operations of their troops, although they are not the only offenders. If the Taliban are going to take NATO seriously, they need to believe that NATO is there for the long haul and will not be scared away by high casualties. Political will should be mustered by NATO leaders to declare, in a unified public voice, belief in the finality of war in Afghanistan.

Political will in Brussels and Washington as well as NATO and American troops on the ground count in Afghanistan for little compared to the effects of Pakistan on Afghanistan. The relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are closely interconnected because of their proximity and their large, shared Pashto populations. The Pakistani military establishment views Afghanistan as “strategic depth” in the face of aggression from India and has sought to maintain a friendly regime in Kabul playing a direct role in Afghan internal affairs. The ISI was instrumental in supporting the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s and some elements of both the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence and the Pakistani Army are reported to be continuing to cooperate with the Taliban by offering both material and training support.

Recently, with the advancement of the Taliban into the Swat valley, the approaching threat of Islamic militancy has awakened the Pakistani people to the threat that the Taliban pose to their own country. This has given the government in Islamabad the political will to launch a large scale offensive against the Taliban, in which the Pakistani army was able to recapture the valley after heavy fighting. This victory may not last long. The Taliban often just melt back into the civilian population and carry out the war underground which would herald a return to suicide bombings. The international community needs to build on the recent anti-Taliban sentiment in Pakistan to pressure the government to coordinate a large scale military action with NATO. If we can ensure full Pakistani cooperation in an operation the chances of success are vastly increased. Before the military campaign begins on both sides of the border a massive propaganda campaign

should be waged. Any means of connivance would be used to inform the Taliban of their options: 1) accept the offer that the Afghan government has offered you, or 2) die.

The details of the offer to the Taliban fighters should be something along the lines of the following: \$3000 USD when the fighter agrees to disarm and registers with the Afghan government, with oversight from the Red Crescent Society to insure that the lists are not used for nefarious means. The former fighter would then be given a farm or other dwelling, as well as seed, equipment and other training. The former insurgent would be required to live in for 10 years after which they would be given \$10,000 USD. As long as the former fighter does not aid the insurgency or grow opium. The overall scheme would be used to entice Taliban fighters to leave the mountains, keeping them busy when they come out of them and give them the incentive to stay out of them. Compared to the long term costs of fighting a war in Afghanistan with foreign soldiers this is by far the most cost effective and least bloody solution.

The Taliban leadership pose a different problem than the average Taliban fighter. Payoffs may work to pacify some insurgent leaders as it has in the past, but the only lasting and realistic option would be some sort of power sharing agreement. Afghanistan is a deeply religious Muslim country and the Taliban have true support amongst the Pashto population. The political ideas that the Taliban represent will need an outlet and within the mechanisms of a democratic system seems the best way to moderate those ideas. For some Taliban leaders they will never give up the fight against what they view as a foreign occupation by infidels in a Muslim country and the only option is to fight to the death. As quick as possible these leaders need to be captured or killed. This will demonstrate to the insurgents the only options: cooperation or death.

The entire programme needs to be governed by the Afghan government itself rather than an international agency. The disarmament of thousands of fighters would be a tremendous task for the Afghan government but it is a task that it must undertake if it wants to build legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people and the Taliban. Where ever possible an Afghan face to the entire operation needs to be presented, it needs to be Afghans taking the lead in the combat, diplomacy and development, or at the very least appear to be doing so. No doubt international expertise will be required to meet many challenges but this help should be exercised as effectively and discretely as possible. The more active and effective the Afghan government appears to be the more people will side with it because they will view it as the only possible winner in this war.

No matter what strategy is enacted by coalition forces or what level of development is obtained under our stewardship it would all be a waste if the Afghan security forces are unable to take over the job of providing security to Afghan civilians. The Afghan security forces are divided into two major branches the army and the police. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is regarded as competent by both foreign forces and Afghan civilians. The ANA often fights in coordination with foreign forces and foreign trainers are imbedded in ANA units, building a high level of trust between the two organizations. Despite their effectiveness as individual soldiers the ANA continues to be underfunded and undermanned tasked with the daunting task of stabilizing Afghanistan. The Afghan National Police (ANP) continues to be plagued by corruption and ineffectiveness, shaking down the very people that they are supposed to protect. The ANP is even more under-resourced than the army and reform will take time but is a necessary step to a more peaceful society. Both the army and the police need vastly greater resources to meet the challenges that Afghanistan faces, these are issues that will need to be addressed before foreign troops leave.

Although this plan presents a way to deal with the situation in Afghanistan, long term sustainability depends on the development of Afghan security forces. The international community needs to show that it is serious about its mission in Afghanistan and it needs to do so soon. The Afghan government needs to develop its own capacity to provide basic services and security. The Taliban need to leave the mountains and reintegrated into Afghan society. Finally, the Coalition forces need to get out of Afghanistan as safely and quickly as possible. Only through effective coordination can we hope to win in Afghanistan, failure will just leave this problem for another generation.

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