

A Limited Commitment in Afghanistan:

Since 2001, a growing insurgency has mounted in Afghanistan that combines elements of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban as well as international terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. The insurgency fuels instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is producing mounting numbers of American casualties. The insurgents are composed of indigenous ethnic-political groups such as the Taliban, and a network of international Jihadists from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere.

The US is currently faced with a decision as to whether our strategic aims are well served by committing indefinitely to the Afghan state in order to ensure its stability. Ideally, a functioning Afghan government could project sufficient force throughout its territory to prevent the establishment of terrorist safe-havens. A stable and sovereign Afghan state would be the most desirable outcome, however, an indefinite commitment of American military presence to the region would not be in America's strategic interest.

Any deployment that is perceived to be indefinite would undermine the stability of the Afghan government and fuel militancy in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Further, the spectre of a permanent American military presence in Afghanistan would heighten tensions between the US and Iran and prove detrimental to American attempts to diplomatically resolve the Iranian nuclear program. Lastly, an indefinite commitment would alienate Russia and China at a time when America needs to seek compromise and accommodation. A large short-term commitment with a well communicated remit and a schedule for drawdown would provide security relief for the beleaguered Afghan government and provide the best chance of achieving a stable Afghan state without destabilizing Pakistan or alienating regional states.

Capitalizing on the Surge

President Obama has pledged to commit an additional 21,000 US troops to Afghanistan. This American surge is to be supplemented by additional troop commitments by coalition and NATO forces and is designed to stem the further deterioration of security in Afghanistan, particularly in the Southern and Eastern parts of the country that border Pakistan. However, the additional military presence alone is insufficient to construct a sustainable state of security and gains made through the increase in military capacity must be consolidated through a strategy that strengthens local policing and administrative structures. In particular, the US should seek to professionalize the Afghan National Police (ANP) whose corruption serves to decrease confidence in the Afghan Government.

Afghan public opinion is intimately linked to the prevalent security conditions, access to economic development, and rule of law. Corrupt local

authorities, in particular the ANP, are eroding public support for the Afghan Government. The current surge in American troops should be designed to create the stable security conditions that would allow the Afghan government to professionalize its security forces. For the surge to be maximally effective the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) need to be streamlined and integrated within a single command structure. In order to enhance Afghan government legitimacy and increase tactical effectiveness the US should begin to implement the following policies over the next two years:

- 1.) The US, in conjunction with its allies, should begin negotiations on a Status of Forces agreement that would make clear the sovereign authority of the Afghan government and define clear roles for ISAF forces.
- 2.) The current policy of air strikes, both officially in Afghanistan and unofficially in Pakistan, should be discontinued or seriously overhauled to minimize civilian deaths. The current policy has produced unacceptable levels of civilian casualties, which alienate the Afghan population.
- 3.) Public diplomacy should highlight the clear distinction between the American war against al Qaeda, and the more provincial Afghan war against the Taliban. The Taliban have a base in Pashtun nationalism that makes them more amenable to a political settlement. Any settlement should stress the absolute necessity of disavowing al Qaeda and recognizing the sovereignty of the Afghan government.
- 4.) Control of Afghan detainees should be shifted from US detention facilities such as Bagram to Afghan facilities, with the help of US training and supervision. In addition, US and partner ISAF forces must jointly determine a detainee policy that is consistent with international law and does not alienate Afghan public opinion. Afghan detainees should be tried in Afghan courts in order to underline the sovereignty of the Afghan government and the existence of the rule of law.

The above recommendations hinge upon effectively communicating that the US military presence is temporary and intended solely to assist the fledgling Afghan state. The perception that the US forces are intending a permanent presence would fuel the insurgency and risks further destabilizing not only Afghanistan but neighbouring Pakistan as well. The vital strategic importance of Pakistani stability for the wider region and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities mean that no program aimed at Afghan stability should be pursued at the expense of Pakistan's stability.

Pakistan

The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has become the refuge of Taliban fighters and a network of international terrorists including al Qaeda. The international terrorist groups find support in the predominantly Pashtun local population. The Taliban movement has become intertwined with movements associated with Pashtun nationalism. The extent of the Pashtun's commitment to the protection of al Qaeda is unclear. Pashtun's follow a tribal code Pashtunwali whose central animating principle is honour (*izzat*), which produces obligations of revenge (*badal*) and sanctuary (*melmastia*). A foreign military presence necessitates revenge, and the protection of al Qaeda is an obligation of sanctuary. Consequently, the effects of civilian casualties are doubly damaging to America as they necessitate revenge and highlight the Pashtun's honourable offer of sanctuary to al Qaeda.

The recent Taliban offensive in Pakistan appears to be alienating local Pashtun populations through a heavy-handed approach towards civilians. The New York Times reported on 8 June 2009 that a local community had attacked the Taliban in retaliation for a suicide bomb. Since then the Pakistani Army has begun to work in conjunction with local Pashtun militias against the Taliban and al Qaeda. Without provocative American air strikes in the region, or the spectre of American imperialism, the Taliban appear likely to alienate their support in local communities through unpopular social policies. Further, the Pashtuns' more limited and nationalistic aims will conflict with al Qaeda's global ambitions, and it is likely that Pashtun Taliban can be persuaded to participate in Afghan or Pakistani political processes and abandon their support for al Qaeda.

Pakistan's perception of America holds that we are fickle allies who fail to take Pakistan's strategic objectives into account. In order to counter this perception America should commit to military training in counterinsurgency and economic support for Pakistan, and should attempt to resolve differences between India and Pakistan in relation to Kashmir. The Pakistani intelligence organization ISI has supported international terrorist elements and the Taliban to use as irregulars in Kashmir. An American commitment to resolving the Kashmir dispute would help to allay Pakistani fears and convince the ISI to stop supporting the Taliban. These objectives hinge upon the effective communication of America's aims in the region.

Strategic Communication

US strategic aims rest upon our ability to communicate our intentions effectively to the populations and governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan in particular will require frequent reassurance that America is committed to supporting the Pakistani government in its attempt to quell insurgency, but not imperious in our designation of strategic objectives. Taliban rule in parts of Pakistan is already producing a local backlash and if

American diplomacy is careful to position itself as supportive of the Pakistani government and avoids alienating tactics such as drone strikes the Taliban insurgency may well destroy its own base.

Special Representative Holbrooke should stress in talks to Afghan and Pakistani leadership that the US is committed to supporting both governments, and that the US military presence is temporary. Iran has a vested interest in an Afghan Government that can limit the flow of opium into Iran. Russia also has an interest in the success of the US against al Qaeda, as Russia struggles with international Islamist terrorists in Chechnya. Further, Russian cooperation is required in order to effectively supply American forces through the Central Asian states. However, both Iran and Russia are concerned about a permanent US presence in the region. Clearly communicating America's commitment to a withdrawal would enable cooperation with Russia and enhance our diplomatic position in relation to Iran. The American presence in Afghanistan is viewed by Iran as a direct threat, and strengthens Iranian resolve to pursue a nuclear program. Direct talks with Iran communicating America's promise not to establish permanent military bases in Afghanistan would enable progress on non-proliferation.

It is areas of strategic interest such as the Iranian nuclear program and the endurance of the Pakistani state that should remain America's primary strategic objectives. Insofar as an indefinite American military presence in Afghanistan jeopardizes Pakistani stability and complicates Iranian non-proliferation it is not in America's strategic interest. A limited commitment on a designated timescale, well communicated to all the concerned parties, is the best policy for balancing America's objectives in the region.