



Afghanistan: Thinking Through the Basics

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Conclusions:

- Our choice is stark: succeed in building a somewhat cohesive state in Afghanistan, or lose.
- Those who call for an indefinite continuation of a narrow, military-based counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan fail to see that this strategy failed under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Hunting terrorists has never achieved any permanent result. If the United States just goes on killing terrorists as the Afghan state falls apart, it will be harder and harder for us to maintain our presence.
- Most analysts in the “it’s hopeless, let’s leave” school ignore or downplay what ought to be the first consideration: the risks of a Taliban (and via them, Al Qaeda) return to power. Officials of the central government will be powerless before the fragmenting effect of tribal militias and warlords. A better organized and unified Taliban will likely be the main force for unification and stability to the country’s exhausted peoples, as has happened in the past.
- Buying security from local tribal leaders is at best a short-term palliative. The militia commanders cannot stand together, and the Taliban has repeatedly proved it is stronger than the tribes and knows how to subdue them. (In Pakistan, estimates are that more than 150 tribal leaders have been killed by the Taliban.) And the Taliban, unlike many other competing forces in Afghanistan, don’t want to be paid; they want to win.
- In building a cohesive state, there are two fundamental challenges: protecting the civilian population

and having a government that can rally enough popular support to sustain the fighting. The former requires the buildup of real military and police forces in the country by the international community. The latter means that corrupt forms of governance must be pushed back and minimized.

- Sustained state building in Afghanistan must necessarily involve the United Nations, other international donors, and at least the tacit support of regional stakeholders such as Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. A key first step would be for the United States to articulate a clear long-term strategy for Afghan state building and to make credible commitments to implement it over time.
- Afghanistan proves that some of the weakest nations now pose the greatest threats to the United States and others. It is in our strong common interest to reduce the dangers of terrorism, regional instability, drug trafficking, and other challenges from Afghanistan and elsewhere.

A Stark Choice

The recent outpouring of writings on Afghanistan is replete with premises and assumptions that do not reflect the realities of the situation. As America faces testing times and critical decisions about how or even whether to continue a war started by the attack of September 11 eight years ago, it is time to review fundamentals. The lack of such “beginning with the basics” is one reason that so much of the discussion is confused. The issue of “narrow goals” compounds this confusion because it is being used to mean two different things: one of which has failed and will fail again, and the other isn’t narrow.

The real narrow goal is reflected in the original Rumsfeld strategy of ignoring state building in order to hunt terrorists. It failed. It allowed the Taliban to regrow without having created a state or a military that was capable of resisting. Meanwhile, hunting terrorists has never achieved any permanent benefit; one killed or captured leader is simply replaced by another.

Those who think we could maintain such hunt-and-kill tactics from afar do not understand the need for forces and intelligence on the ground. And if we are just killing as the Afghan state falls apart, it will be harder and harder to maintain our presence. Afghans desperately want security. If we are not there to help bring that stability, then hostility toward us will only grow as Afghans opt for security under the Taliban rather than endless war with us.

The other expression of limited goals is what President Obama talks about—getting rid of Al Qaeda. But the Al Qaeda network is international and not state-based; it can reestablish itself in Afghanistan if the state falls apart. The Obama administration recognizes this in a strategy that is based on strengthening the Afghan state and protecting the population. These goals are rational, but they are not limited. They may be more limited than trying for 21st century liberal democracy with full gender equality, freedom of religion, and one-man-one-vote. But except by comparison with an impossible idealism, it is still a very large undertaking—essentially the creation of an Afghan state sufficiently stable to fight a low-level insurgency for a long time, with foreign help but without being dependent on foreign forces. This is an extraordinarily ambitious objective. As much as we might wish there were credible lesser objectives, there are none.

Policy discussion needs to start with consideration of whether the last statement is correct—that there are no other acceptable choices—and then go on to look at both the risks of failure and the chances of success. If the counterterrorism approach will not work, neither will turning over the state to some other power, because there is none. There is no general, army, or political force waiting in the wings. Local security based on militias simply replicates the corrupt structures that tore the country apart in civil war after the fall of the communists, which led to the rise of the Taliban. The mass of Afghans fear the Taliban

and are sick to death of the government of rapacious warlords, too many of whom remain in power. Remove the foreign forces without leaving anything to take their place and the Taliban would quickly regain control over substantial portions of the country.

When the tribes were strong and wanted mostly just to be left alone, one could buy security. But the tribes are now fragmented. The militia commanders cannot stand together and the Taliban has repeatedly proven it is stronger than the tribes and knows how to subdue them. (In Pakistan, estimates are that more than 150 tribal leaders have been killed by the Taliban.) And the Taliban, unlike other barbarians, don't want to be paid; they want to win. So our choices are stark. Succeed in building a somewhat cohesive state, or lose.

The Risks of Defeat

A good deal of the analysis that concludes we should leave Afghanistan soon seems to have as a basis, either explicit or implicit, a conclusion that leaving—losing—will not seriously alter the risks to our vital national interests, including further attacks on the United States. Yet writings with this premise do not explain why this is so. Most writers in the “it's hopeless, let's leave” school ignore or downplay the question that ought to be the first consideration in deciding how many lives and how much money we are willing to exchange for an, admittedly, low chance of success. I believe the risks we run in defeat are real and substantial.

Bruce Riedel's book *The Search of Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future* provides a good summary of the Al Qaeda strategy: suck us into wars we can't win, exhaust us, continue the attacks to drive us out of the Muslim world, and overthrow its governments. I do not believe Al Qaeda can ultimately succeed, but it can kill a lot of people along the way. Our retreat from Afghanistan would lead to the fragmentation of the state. The Taliban cannot govern well but, against a fragmented leadership unable to provide security for its population, the Taliban could again control substantial portions of at least the Pashtu population.

This would leave a fragmented, war-torn state in the heart of Central Asia. The continued fighting would draw support from neighbors determined

to prevent those they view as hostile from coming to power and menacing them from Afghanistan. Iran, Pakistan, India, and Russia have all played this role before and are likely to be dragged into it again.

The consequences for Pakistan would be enormous. Afghanistan would become the strategic rear for extremists in the tribal areas. A weak Pakistani state with leadership divided between military and civilians, and facing US collapse in Afghanistan, would be more likely (on the basis of past actions) to seek a deal, no matter how transitory and illusionary, than fight to the death. Fear of India, still seen in Islamabad as the greater enemy, would also incline Pakistani leaders to leave the militants alone or even collaborate with them.

How dangerous is this to us? The Taliban, as such, is more interested in power in Afghanistan and Pakistan than in waging war against us. Maybe they would present a problem, but not an overwhelming threat—at least until they gain access to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. That is not impossible, but the bulk of the evidence suggests otherwise.

Al Qaeda was so closely linked to the Taliban leadership in 2001 that the Taliban refused to give Al Qaeda up to avoid war. In the years since, every bit of intelligence and analysis I know of suggests that the links have become tighter and the two more integrated. Al Qaeda leaders have followed a regular policy of intermarriage and integration into tribal society on both sides of the Durand Line. Assuming a Taliban victory would not be also an Al Qaeda victory belongs in the category of pious hope, not analysis.

American defeat in Afghanistan would be an incredible victory for jihad. Hence, withdrawal from Afghanistan will bring real and numerous risks of further attack against us, both in the region and in the United States. Those who argue that this war is just too hard and too costly need either to explain why the risks are different from those described above, or why they think these risks are acceptable. Instead, we seem to have a discussion by people who assume that we can make a unilateral decision to quit the field when everything we know about Al Qaeda says that this is not a choice available to us.

A Long Overdue Commitment to Capacity Building

If one accepts my conclusions about risk, then that leads to the question of whether what I have defined as success is possible at any price that is remotely politically sustainable for us. I believe it is possible, although by no means assured.

There are two fundamental problems: protecting the civilian population, and having a government that can rally enough popular support to sustain the fighting in a way that convinces Afghans to throw in their lot with the government. The latter is far less a matter of development than of people being convinced that our side is winning and that they can find a reasonable level of justice (meaning fairness, not application of procedural rules).

On the military side, it is evident that we must now make the long overdue commitment to build sizable and capable Afghan security forces. We did this in Iraq. Local forces there are three times the size of the still unmet targets we are working toward in Afghanistan (600,000 in Iraq vs. a target of 216,000 in Afghanistan—with little logistics, medevac, or fire support for a country larger and topographically more difficult than Iraq). But building Afghan forces will take time. Congress must approve funding, equipment needs to be bought, recruits trained, and new units brought up to professional standards.

International forces will be needed for several years to shield the construction of a much larger Afghan army. We have wasted years in arriving at the decision to build Afghan forces to their necessary size and competence. The Obama administration continues to spend precious time reaching a decision that is plainly necessary. In 2007, I reported from Kabul that we were neither building a margin for victory nor guarding against surprise, and that by 2008 we might be losing. We continue to proceed as though we could win a war by putting in just a little more to stave off defeat when matters worsen. It has been, and remains, a mistaken notion of what war requires.

But failure to take the measures necessary to succeed in the past is scarcely proof that we cannot succeed now. Afghan conflicts have repeatedly shown tipping points where Afghans decide one side is winning and popular sentiment shifts massively to that side. This happened more

frequently than victory through pitched battle. The Taliban rolled up the road from Kandahar to Kabul without major battles because of this phenomenon. The same thing happened in 2001 when the foreign fighters and a few die-hard supporters suddenly found that the rest of their Afghan allies had gone home. The same thing could happen again but, while we can work for the conditions to create such a tipping point, we cannot predict it. We must alter the present military balance in Afghanistan.

Some seek a shortcut through paying groups to change sides and maintain security. While this shortcut cannot work as an alternative to state building and fighting, it can contribute when tribesmen decide they are joining a winning side. But a side seen as losing, and right now that is us, cannot buy its way to success. And if we simply recreate the disputatious militias of the late mujahedeen period, we will be building on sand.

The second piece is helping a reasonably strong Afghan state to emerge. This is quite difficult. But it is also at this point that most of what we need to do is not a matter of grand strategy or policy, but of how we apply resources. The most recent Afghan election has not gone well. Yet even without fraud, President Karzai is likely to be reelected. We will need patience and resolve to help existing Afghan mechanisms sort out the problems. We should take care that our short-term efforts do not leave whatever government emerges even weaker than it already is. Working to correct abuses in critical areas, such as the police, needs concentrated effort but, over time and with greater resources than we applied in the past, it is possible.

Seizing the Achievable in the Short Term

Because change on the battlefield and in governance will be slow at best, we need to be realistic about what can be achieved in order to guard against excessive expectations being quickly succeeded by excessive defeatism. Thus it is important now to sketch out, publicly, some limited short-term objectives.

The Obama administration needs to seize the terms of the domestic debate a year hence by publicly laying out now a limited number of objectives that it can achieve. Success will show that its plans are working. Securing the areas right around Kabul and a few major cities is

possible. So, too, is reestablishing security (from attack and illegal tolls) on the Kandahar-Kabul highway. Crime, especially kidnapping and robbery in Kabul, needs to be put down. Such actions would not win the war but when these goals are explained and then reached, they would blunt the present Afghan and foreign psychological sense of inevitable decline. But failure to explain now what can, and cannot, be done in the near future will mean that in a year the same actions will be discounted, lost in a babble of discussion about other problems and lack of security in other areas.

Only by frankness now, followed by limited, short-term success, can we convey a sense that progress is possible and, thus, maintain sufficient US political support to achieve larger goals in the long run. We may lose in the end. But as we have no alternatives other than winning or losing, I would opt to fight on as long, as hard, and as skillfully as we can.

There is a great deal to be said about the tactics of how we need to fight, and both press and strengthen whoever governs in Kabul. Much of this will have to be worked out on the ground; this is more art than science. Having never put in the resources to succeed in the past is no proof that we cannot do so now. We have a new team and, finally, are bringing to bear the resources we should have started devoting to the effort years ago. But additional troops have had only a few months to begin reversing a situation that has been deteriorating for at least four years. Many of the additional civilians have yet to reach Afghanistan, and new projects take time to start and longer to have any effect. It is absurd to conclude that a complex effort can succeed or be judged in a few months, or by weekly second-guessing. Time and patience, resources and sacrifice are necessary. In view of the stakes and the choices, they are also essential.

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