

SAVING AFGHANISTAN

Julianne Smith

When asked what will be the biggest foreign policy challenge for the United States in 2008, most people cite the war in Iraq. With U.S. elections approaching and increasingly vocal calls from the American public to withdraw, questions about U.S. staying power as well as Iraq's fragile future are expected to dominate headlines well into 2008. However, unless appropriate steps are taken now, another U.S.-led operation—the war in Afghanistan—threatens to become equally intractable for policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic for years to come. Afghanistan is heading in the wrong direction, and short of a complete overhaul of NATO strategy, it threatens to take its people, the future of the Alliance, and transatlantic relations along with it.

Several missteps over the last two to three years have gradually eroded outsiders' confidence and taken Afghanistan off its early positive trajectory. As in Iraq, the initial military operation was successful, meeting little resistance and quickly eliminating the Taliban regime, which had provided safe haven for al Qaeda. Neglecting the lessons of previous interventions, though, which suggest that reconstruction is fundamental to long-term stability, the coalition made mistakes that continue to haunt the mission to this day.

The most glaring challenge—one that fuels a number of other problems on the ground—is the lack of a coordinated strategy. This is true both on the

purely military level and in the area of civil-military cooperation. Some innovative models—such as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—have been developed. But in the case of the PRTs, each is led by a different nation, with little cooperation or common approach, resulting in confusion as to who does what, when, and where.

The United States and its allies have also failed to come up with a viable counternarcotics strategy. Recent estimates by the United Nations suggest that, despite sizeable sums spent by the West to put an end to it, Afghanistan's opium production continues to grow, increasing by 34 percent since last year. The country's output now accounts for a



staggering 93 percent of the world's opium supply. Multiple ideas, ranging from new methods for poppy eradication to legalizing the crops for medicinal purposes, have been proposed to counter this trend, but consensus and resources remain elusive.

Because of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf's help in the hunt for al Qaeda, the United States and its partners have also neglected to address larger regional problems, especially the deepening unrest in Pakistan. As a result, Islamist rebellions in the lawless North-West Frontier Province and South Waziristan are growing and have had a dramatic destabilizing effect on Afghanistan.

Finally, many coalition partners never adequately explained to their publics the goals that their troops sent to Afghanistan are helping to accomplish. In some countries participation is justified on purely humanitarian grounds, while in others there is no public debate at all. Yet, as the security situation in the region has deteriorated and the number of casu-

alties has grown, public opposition to the Afghanistan mission has mounted. This has put enormous pressure on political elites to bring their troops home just at a time when greater support (on both the security and development side) is needed.

The question for the next six months, therefore, is whether NATO and its partners on the ground will and can make the necessary mid-course corrections to save the mission in Afghanistan from failure. Or will the coalition simply muddle through?

To be sure, the list of mid-course corrections needed is long. First, the UN should appoint a special high commissioner to take on the herculean task of coordinating the various international actors on the ground and provide a framework under which various soft and hard tasks can be merged.

Second, NATO needs to redesign its overarching concept for its Afghan mission. That process should begin with clear agreement and articulation

of the mission's aims, followed by a clarification of how NATO's role fits into what some have dubbed the three Ds: defense, development, and diplomacy. Leaders in NATO countries then need to take that strategy to their publics and reiterate why this mission is crucial for the future of Afghanistan, the safety and security of American and European citizens, and NATO more broadly.

Third, more resources need to be put toward the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. That means greater involvement of multilateral and international organizations, such as the World Bank, the UN, and the European Union. Those organizations are on the ground, but their contributions to date have not come close to matching the scale of the tasks at hand. Police training, for example, is still woefully underfunded. And without proper training, the local army and police forces cannot be entrusted to prevent the Taliban from establishing lawless fiefdoms from which attacks can be launched on the Afghan government. There must also be massive in-

vestment in rural development to give local farmers an alternative to growing poppies and thus undercut the Taliban's stranglehold on the opium trade.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of people are advocating just the opposite: that coalition countries, instead of making such mid-course corrections, should begin planning for withdrawal. Such calls are worrying. The dangers and consequences of abandoning Afghanistan to internal strife and economic collapse are very real. The aftershocks of a withdrawal would quickly spread throughout the region and reach the borders of Europe and the shores of the United States, possibly in the form of future terrorist attacks. Designing and implementing a new strategy for Afghanistan is not only what the international community owes to the Afghan people, but also what it owes to itself. ■

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