

COMMENTARY

Afghanistan: The Problem is Far More than Troop Levels

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The problems in Afghanistan involve far more than troop levels. The military problem is not simply the number of boots on the ground; it is just as much the brains above them. Even more important, it is how to go from winning kinetic battles to securing areas: as we learned in Iraq, we must go from “win” to “win, hold, build.”

Afghanistan is an intensely regional, ethnic, and sectarian war; and there are much more complex tribal divisions and interests than in Iraq. The Afghan-Pakistan War is fought in forward areas with far more difficult and diverse terrain and with far worse lines of communication and support. Just from a tactical view, effective military operations require specialized tactical training and rested/combat-ready U.S. troops, and careful thought about reequipment. It also requires new civil-military training to work effectively with the local populace, as well as with allied forces, and in the special problems of potentially fighting near the FATA and Baluchi border areas.

The U.S. also must find ways to deal effectively with NATO/ISAF and British, Canadian, Danish, and Dutch forces. Regardless of the level of U.S. reinforcements in 2008 and 2009, success depends on supporting allied forces in the south—not replacing them—and on working with them to build up steadily more capable Afghan forces and Afghan governance.

Working with the ANA and ANP is different enough from working with the Iraqi forces so that special training is needed, and more fully qualified U.S. advisers are even more important than more U.S. combat troops. Recent GAO and DoD reports show that the combined NATO/ISAF/U.S. force only has 30–40 percent of the qualified trainers and embeds needed for the Afghan Army, and the police effort is experiencing so many problems it has recently been zero-based and is now focused on a district by district effort to reform the over 350 police districts at a rate of one critical district per month.

More significantly, the shortage of qualified civilians and aid workers, and flexible and readily usable economic aid funds is even more critical than the shortage of troops. The latest DoD report on Afghanistan has a table showing that some 2,021 soldiers are assigned forward to PRTs, and there are all of 25 qualified civilians. The quality of Afghan provincial, district, and local governance, development activity, and rule of law is much weaker than even the limited efforts in Iraq, and Afghanistan has virtually no disposable assets of its own and is even more ineffective and corrupt in using them.

There are critical problems in actually getting aid money to the areas it is needed. U.S. economic aid funding is grossly inadequate. OMB severely cut back the funds Ambassador Neuman and General Eikenberry requested for FY2007 and there have been chronic U.S. funding problems ever since. Things are even worse with other donors: undelivered pledges, opaque programs, the flow of much of the funding to companies and NGOs in ways that spend outside Afghanistan, little aid in high threat or critical areas, and a lack of focus on Agriculture in a country that is 70 percent agricultural. The coordination of various aid efforts is terrible, accounting and transparency are often lacking, little effort has been made to validate requirements, and there are virtually no efforts to make meaningful measures of effectiveness.

Finally, virtually every military officer, civilian official, and intelligence officer who deals with Afghanistan realizes that the war not only is unwinnable on a purely military basis, it is probably unwinnable without basic changes in the role that the Pakistani government its forces play in the FATA and Baluchi areas of Pakistan. This is not an Afghan war, it is an Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict. At present, the Pakistani Army is largely ineffective in counterinsurgency, and the Pakistani Frontier Corps is an unsalvageable mess. Worse, government forces now largely stand aside while Pakistan's

internal power struggles play themselves out and competing Pakistani efforts are made to negotiate with local Taliban and other extremist forces.

More troops for Afghanistan can only impact on half the war. It is not clear, however, that most Pakistani believe a major effort to secure FATA and Baluchi areas is necessary, that Pakistan can quickly resolve the internal divisions that limit it, and that there is any unity in the Pakistani Army over challenging the Taliban, Al Qa'ida, and other Islamist extremist threats. Worse, Pakistani governance in both the FATA and Baluchi efforts is weak to non-existent, Al Qa'ida center is now in the FATA area along with rising numbers of foreign volunteers, and Pakistan has yet to show it has any capability (or willingness and lack of corruption) in providing economic aid to FATA and Baluchi areas. Once again, aid dollars are as important as bullets, but recent GAO reporting raises critical questions about whether such aid will ever be used in ways that do more good than harm.

Finally, the U.S. desperately needs an integrated joint campaign plan to tie all of these efforts together. It simply does not have one, particularly if a plan is described as something that lays out detailed course of action, funds them, and provides ongoing measures of effectiveness. Rather than clear direction and coordination, the Afghan-Pakistan War is an inchoate mess, with deep divisions between U.S. efforts in Eastern Afghanistan, NATO/ISAF efforts, and Pakistan. There are neither meaningful plans nor unity of action in the UN and NATO/ISAF, critical allied states are paralyzed or limited by national caveats on what they can do, and a polite facade of unity disguises what is sometimes a backbiting mess.

None of this means that the Afghan-Pakistan War has to continue to deteriorate. For all the present problems, the fact remains that we are fighting a mix of small, extremist enemies that are both weak and find it difficult to build any broad support and popularity. Building up effective Afghan and Pakistani forces and governance may take years, but it is clearly feasible if the U.S. and the West show patience in Afghanistan and if Pakistan can resolve its own internal power struggle and come to realize how dangerous developments in the FATA and Baluchi areas are to its own future. The challenge is not so much defeating the enemy, but creating an effective overall mix of U.S. action and leadership that corrects for past and current mistakes.

This does, however, clearly depend on the Bush administration doing as much as it can to deal with the overall mix of problems shaping the war, fully resourcing all of the necessary efforts that it can, working to properly fund the war in the FY2010 budget request, and developing a transition plan that can compensate as much as possible for the failure to properly plan since 2002. It also depends on the next president being ready to act as soon as possible on coming to office. The new president will come to office and put his team in place at the start of a critical 2009 fighting season. We have now wasted much of four critical years by under resourcing, reacting too slowly, and failing to produce unity of action. We cannot waste 2009 as well.

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