Confronting Two Key Challenges in Afghanistan

PCR Project Research Visit

By Karin von Hippel

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Karin von Hippel just returned from a week-long, NATO-sponsored tour of Afghanistan with a small group of researchers from Europe and North America. The group visited Kabul, two provinces in the North (Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh and Kunduz), and two in the South (Kandahar and Uruzgan). They were briefed by dozens of military officials, a handful of international civilians, and a smaller number of Afghans (this was due to the trip overlapping with Eid-ul-Fitr as well as NATO concerns about security). Below, she analyzes two key challenges for Afghans and their coalition partners. This is followed by a short photo-journal of the trip.

Summary

In mid-October, several prominent senior officials – including Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – publicly voiced skepticism about the situation in Afghanistan. On Thursday, 16 October, Mullen concluded, "The trends across the board are not going in the right direction," and remarked that next year would be even tougher. This public airing may be necessary to ensure that all actors are fully focused on critical reforms necessary for success: the U.S. government has itself launched a number of key reviews of the situation in Afghanistan, which should be released shortly after the U.S. Presidential elections.

Given the large number of excellent studies addressing many of the important governance, security and development challenges for Afghanistan,[1] this report will focus on two key areas that have only recently been in the spotlight. The first is whether and how to talk to the Taliban, and the second concerns the lines of authority for the U.S. and coalition forces. Resolving these two issues would make a fundamental contribution to the overall goal of the mission, which is to build a safe, secure and effective Afghan state.

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[1] See, for example, Clare Lockhart, "The Aid Relationship in Afghanistan: Struggling for Government Leadership," Managing Aid Dependency Project, Oxford University: Global Economic Governance Programme, GEG Working Paper 2007/27, June 2007; Seth G. Jones, "The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad," International Security, 32:4 (Spring 2008), pp. 7–40; articles by my colleague Anthony Cordesman at CSIS and J.Alex Thier at U.S. Institute of Peace; International Crisis Group reports on Afghanistan; reports by the World Bank; and Reports of the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council on the Situation in Afghanistan.

Background

The PCR Project has been working on both Afghanistan and Pakistan for most of the last decade as part of the project's focus on countries in conflict and transition.[2] The situation on the ground in Afghanistan is perhaps the most challenging and complex of all stabilization operations undertaken since the end of the Cold War. Promoting democracy and development in one of the world's poorest countries, where only 28% of its 33 million people can read and write (this figure drops to 4% in many rural areas), and which has endured over three decades of civil war would be difficult enough if that were the extent of the problem. Throw in a bloody insurgency - one that is highly decentralized, rapidly evolving, linked with international narcotics and transnational terrorist networks, and which has a sophisticated strategic communications capacity - and the results are daunting.

Coalition deaths have climbed to 920 since the start of the conflict, and some of these come from countries where the publics are not fully convinced of the urgency of the mission. The Afghan death toll for its civilians, police officers and soldiers is far greater than this, though not as well documented. While everyone may now be fully seized that "something must be done" - which is critical - consensus still needs to be reached among and between the Afghan government and international partners on several key governance, security and development challenges, two of which are discussed more fully below.

I.   Talking to the Taliban

A number of *ad hoc* negotiations with the Taliban have taken place over the past few years, yet last month's leak of talks sponsored by Saudi Arabia have received more attention. Some experts have argued that these talks were not serious and could have easily been held in Kabul without any difficulties, unless senior members of the "Quetta Shura" were in attendance, which is not known.[3] Nevertheless, the idea of talks has gained currency: most members of the international coalition have given talks a tacit endorsement by remarking, "The war cannot be won by military means alone."

While this *realpolitik* approach has been welcomed by many war-weary Afghans, others are concerned that the change in attitude is based more on the deteriorating security situation, rather than a grand

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[2] Morgan Courtney, In the Balance: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2005), http://www.csis.org/index.php?option=com_csis_pubs&task=view&id=2580; Seema Patel and Steven Ross, Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2007), http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/070329_breakingpoint.pdf; Craig Cohen and Derek Chollet, "When $10 Billion is Not Enough: Rethinking U.S. Strategy toward Pakistan," *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007), http://www.twq.com/07spring/docs/07spring_cohen-chollet.pdf; Craig Cohen, *A Perilous Course: U.S. Strategy and Assistance to Pakistan* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2007), http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071214_pakistan.pdf.
[3] For example, Francesc Vendrell, former EU Envoy for Afghanistan, at a meeting in Washington, DC hosted by Center for International Policy, 14 October 2008.

political strategy. For such a strategy to be implemented, five fundamental concerns will need to be ironed out in advance.

a) *Who sits at the table?* The Afghan Taliban is not a monolithic organization. It may not be easy to distinguish between those who are card-carrying members of al-Qaeda, as opposed to the original Taliban, or between those who have committed serious war crimes and others who may have played a more passive role. Are any members or affiliates beyond the pale, such as Mullah Omar or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, both of whom sit near the top of the U.S. designated list of terrorists? And what to do with the "non-negotiables," given that as of now, the Afghan government and its allies have not succeeded in killing or capturing them?

b) *Who are the critical external partners?* Beyond the major western partners and Saudi Arabia, several states in the region, including China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, should also be considered as potential observers of talks. These countries can play a positive or a spoiler role, and thus should be treated as partners with important vested interests. For example, former UN and EU Envoy Francesc Vendrell recently remarked that Iran had been helpful in the past in Afghanistan, notably during the Bonn process, and continues to play more of a positive role than a negative one, even considering the difficult relationship between Presidents Bush and Ahmadinejad.

c) *What incentives are on offer?* The Afghan constitution leaves little space for most of the Taliban's main demands, such as turning Afghanistan into a fundamentalist Islamic state or excluding women from politics. Should the Taliban be offered ministry positions, quiet retirement, house arrest in Kandahar, prison sentences, or death row? President Karzai needs to articulate what is on offer in a public manner and demarcate the boundaries of talks.

d) *Negotiate now or wait for a stronger hand?* Several former senior mediators have recently commented that a critical opportunity to deal with the Taliban was lost in 2001-2002, when it was a defeated and demoralized force. At that time, the international community and the Afghan government decided not to demobilize and integrate the core leadership. This was because of their involvement in 9-11, because the Afghan government refused and because many allies also thought their platform was too extreme. As a result, the Afghan Taliban is today a more decentralized, technology-savvy and violent force than it was in 2001, utilizing new tactics gleaned from operations in Iraq, such as suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). It has also expanded its influence, membership, networks, and logistics capacity across the border into Pakistan. Even if many Taliban are currently tired of fighting and are under pressure, too many others think they have the upper hand. Some analysts are concerned that the Taliban would use the breathing space provided by negotiations to re-arm, as they have done in the past. Does it make more sense to wait, assuming

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military operations go in favor of the Afghan government and coalition forces, so as to negotiate from a position of strength?

e) *If they renounce violence, should the reformed or acceptable Taliban be integrated into the political party system?* Current public opinion polls reveal that the Taliban are not popular. It is possible that the movement could lose its steam very quickly if fear were taken out of the equation. A "Taliban Party" would likely have difficulties garnering public support if it was forced to rely on its political platform alone. This might also help dampen the concerns of many human rights activists, who worry that certain concessions, such as important ministries, would undermine the international community's focus on good governance.

Major governance, security and development challenges in Afghanistan will need to be managed by the Afghan government and people, in full partnership with the international community. Yet the international community itself is not fully unified, which has impeded progress in significant ways.[4] It is not clear who is in charge on the civilian side of the mission, even if nominally the United Nations is in the lead, and a new NATO civilian representative has been deployed to help refocus efforts. This is problematic not only for coordination efforts, but also in that it allows national and regional actors to play different members off one another. Similarly, the United States military, along with its coalition partners, also need to streamline and clarify the chain of command.

II. Chain of Command

The international community learned at great cost the difficulties of military (and civilian) incoherence in Somalia in the early 1990s. A UN peace enforcement mission (UNOSOM II) operated mostly in parallel with a U.S. military operation (UNITAF), which resulted in numerous problems.[5] In addition, troops contributing to UNOSOM II had to "phone home" before becoming involved in fighting, as when the Italians famously had to delay a response to help Pakistani peacekeepers in early June 1993 because they needed approval from Rome, and partly as a result, 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed. These problems are fully evident once again in Afghanistan.

Admiral Mullen and other U.S. military commanders, such as General David Petraeus, the new head of CENTCOM, are advocating a "comprehensive strategy" for the region in order to confront extremism and insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan. If one focused only on the U.S. military side of such a new approach, this would mean the involvement of four different U.S. combatant commands. The first is European Command (EUCOM), which has responsibility for the 17,700 U.S. troops in the ISAF-NATO

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[4] See Lockhart's article, op cit.
[5] See Karin von Hippel, *Democracy by Force*, pp.55-91, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

operation, under the command of General David McKiernan. Another 10,900 U.S. troops in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) report separately to the second, Central Command (CENTCOM).

As of Thursday, 2 October 2008, the U.S. Senate gave General David McKiernan command of almost all of the 28,600 U.S. troops in Afghanistan - except for some Special Forces, who fall under the third, Special Operations Command, SOCOM. There have already been several cases of blowback due to Special Forces not always coordinating their activities with the other security forces. Even with this somewhat more streamlined approach, McKiernan will still report to both EUCOM and CENTCOM. To complicate matters further, if India is going to be integrated into a regional response - which most analysts consider necessary - this would involve the fourth U.S. combatant command, Pacific Command (PACOM).[6]

General David Petraeus will likely try to make his presence felt in the region, but he will not be in charge of the ISAF-NATO mission. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates will ultimately have to decide how to resolve this fairly complex and overlapping situation by providing special guidance to clarify command and control, preferably before the new administration takes office.

The confusion within the U.S. military setup is compounded by the arrangements for the 41 troop contributing nations (57,000 troops in total) within ISAF, which have various national caveats governing involvement in peacekeeping and peace enforcement. These problems have been well-documented in the press, but the main concern is that, as in Somalia, General McKiernan does not have full command authority as he shares this with a number of national defense ministers. This situation can hardly be described as unified or seamless.

Conclusion

A public discussion of the overall strategy for talks with the Taliban, led by President Karzai and supported by key allies, would help build confidence amongst Afghans, and potentially improve the security situation. Similarly, a more streamlined military command structure on the part of coalition forces would also enable international assistance to be more focused on the desired end-state, rather than on exit strategies.

Please send comments or suggestions to kvonhippel@csis.org.

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[6] This would not entail deployment of Indian troops to Afghanistan.

About the Author

Karin von Hippel is a senior fellow in the CSIS International Security Program and codirector of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project Project. Previously, she was a senior research fellow at the Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, and spent several years working for the United Nations and the European Union in Somalia and Kosovo. In 2004 and 2005, she participated in two major studies for the UN—one on UN peacekeeping and the second on the UN humanitarian system. Also in 2004, she was part of a small team funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to investigate the development potential of Somali remittances. In 2002, she advised the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on the role of development cooperation in countering the root causes of terrorism. She was also a member of Project Unicorn, a counterterrorism police advisory panel in London, and directed a project on European counterterrorist reforms funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Her publications include *Europe Confronts Terrorism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and *Democracy by Force* (Cambridge, 2000), which was short-listed for the Westminster Medal in Military History. She received her PhD in international relations from the London School of Economics, her MSt from Oxford University, and her BA from Yale University.

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