Closing Argument

Neighbourhood Watch

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I

The debate over the end game in Afghanistan heated up after US President Barack Obama's December 2009 West Point speech and the London Conference in late January 2010. Two out of four major potential elements of a strategy are getting headlines: the military approach to counter-insurgency and the 'civilian surge', including both economic aid and support for better governance. A third, the issue of whether, and under what circumstances, to reintegrate or include current Taliban personalities in the final government, is highly controversial. But policymakers in the United States and other NATO countries need to start paying more attention to the fourth: the relationship between Afghanistan and its neighbours, which could undo whatever gains Afghanistan achieves internally. Addressing the neighbourhood needs more than a handy formula; it will require continuing and sustained diplomatic effort.

Obama's appointment of General Stanley McChrystal to head the US military effort in Afghanistan heralded a new look at military counter-insurgency, and the record since January 2010 shows both the potential and the limitations of this change. US and NATO forces are being deployed with an eye to making political gains out of their military successes. Rules of engagement for operations that could inadvertently harm civilians are tighter. The decision to pull US troops out of the Korengal

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Valley, however painful for those who had fought there, should make it easier to focus the military effort on the areas where long-term gains are more likely. The US forces appear to be consciously looking for ways to keep adapting their tactics to a difficult goal and a nimble enemy adept at making the most of an asymmetric fight. Polling data from Afghanistan from late December 2009 suggest that the Afghan public is feeling more secure. It is far too early to declare that the trend lines have reversed course from the discouraging path they were taking in late 2009, but they have a chance of doing so.

The military effort, of course, needs to include, and increasingly to rely on, Afghan forces. The London Conference endorsed ambitious goals for building up the size and capacity of both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan police. NATO and the United States aim to turn the main military responsibility over to Afghans as soon as possible. This is likely to prove even more complicated than it has in Iraq.

At the same time, the military effort and the political strategy behind it are unquestionably hampered by the timetable Obama included in his Afghan policy speech. Administration spokesmen were careful to say that July 2011 was not an exit date, and that they fully expected the United States to maintain a significant presence beyond that point. But however carefully the date was redefined, it was perceived throughout the region as a statement that the Americans were short-timers. This makes the battle of perceptions even more important as the new counter-insurgency strategy takes hold. If the international efforts in Marja and Kandahar are unable to overcome their difficulties, there will be a tendency to see these as the beginning of the end rather than the inevitable challenge of doing something hard.

The 'civilian surge' is at least as important as its military counterpart. It is also harder to measure. Encouraging better governance is enormously difficult and, ironically, is probably complicated by one of the rare pieces of good news on this front, the rather feisty performance of the Afghan parliament. Impressive amounts of aid funding have been pledged, but the real issue is implementation. The normal time from proposing an aid project to actually beginning physical work is close to two years. The

Taliban, moreover, understand that they must at all costs prevent the government from looking competent, and have targeted those who deliver government services (including foreign aid). These assassination campaigns fall especially heavily on the parts of southern Afghanistan where military action is also concentrated.

The central challenge remains re-creating a functioning state – civilian and military – in a country that has never known a strong central government. It's an uphill job, but this is probably the easiest part of the end game.

II

There is broad agreement on the need for an effective counter-insurgency campaign and reconstruction assistance. But when it comes to dealing with the Taliban, there is agreement neither on what that means nor on whether it is desirable.

In its most modest version, re-integration means providing a channel (and perhaps special incentives) for people who have worked with the Taliban, primarily in subordinate roles, to join the government. In the US concept, the only requirements would be a willingness to stop taking up arms against the government and to abandon any association with al-Qaeda.

More ambitious concepts envisage negotiations with more important Taliban personalities or suggest the possibility of an eventual power-sharing arrangement at the heart of the Afghan government. Would important commanders who have been fighting the government for years (or in some cases decades) be prepared to abandon the international extremist movement? Would a government they joined be willing or able to act as a decent neighbour to the rest of the region? Would it have the will or the capacity to govern in ways that prevented Afghanistan from again becoming a terrorist haven?

Closely related is the problem of who would conduct such negotiations. President Hamid Karzai expects to be in the driver's seat. But so does the government of Pakistan (and specifically its intelligence service, ISI); and Washington would expect to be deeply involved. The compe-

tition for influence over this process is already well under way, even though there has been no clear decision on how far such a negotiation might be able to proceed. Pakistan's arrest of an important Afghan Taliban personality, Mullah Baradar, in Karachi in mid-February 2010 is instructive. Baradar was said to have put out feelers to Karzai. In arresting him, Pakistan sent an unmistakable signal that it would block, by whatever means necessary, any negotiations over the future of Afghanistan and the Taliban that took place without a central role for Islamabad. The subsequent news that Pakistan had quietly released several high-level Taliban arrestees underlined that Pakistan intends to manipulate its relationships with this group to further its strategic goal of a friendly government in Kabul.

Washington remains ambivalent about the idea of working with senior Taliban personalities, but contacts with both the Afghan and the Pakistani governments are proceeding as though all the major players had agreed to seek a grand bargain. This risks a colossal misunderstanding. The history of negotiations with Taliban elements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is full of agreements broken, denied, misunderstood and manipulated. It may indeed be necessary to seek out acceptable negotiating partners among Afghanistan's insurgents, but there should be no illusions about the possibility of an orderly negotiating process in which deals are cleanly made and honoured.

III

Ideally, all the outside countries involved in Afghanistan would agree on a solution that provides at least some modest benefits for all, and would leave Afghanistan alone as part of the package. A formal agreement embodying these laudable goals, however, would be hard to reach and harder to enforce. The biggest challenge lies in the incompatible objectives of two pairs of countries from Afghanistan's extended neighbourhood.

Between 1999 and 2001, the United States and Iran participated fairly constructively in a series of New York-based talks on Afghanistan known as the 'Six plus Two'. During the George W. Bush years, this channel dried up. There were hopes for its revival when the Obama administra-

tion took office, but with the fading of the incipient US dialogue with Iran and the turmoil after Iran's election, it has once again become difficult to get Iran and the United States in the same room to discuss Afghanistan. This problem has little to do with Afghanistan; it is all about the poisonous relationship between Washington and Tehran.

The problem of India and Pakistan, however, is directly relevant to the viability of an Afghan settlement. Both countries have an interest in stability in Afghanistan, but beyond that their objectives clash. Islamabad has viewed Afghanistan as a potential Indian stalking horse ever since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, and the two countries have more often than not had bad relations. Since 1979, Pakistan has worked tirelessly to secure its strategic goals in Afghanistan: minimising India's influence and maximising its own. Pakistan twisted arms to prevent Turkey from inviting India to the Istanbul Conference on Afghanistan that preceded the meeting in London. A Taliban-run Afghanistan would not be ideal from Pakistan's perspective: it would reinforce the Pakistani Taliban who are attacking the Pakistani Army, and the last Taliban government was an embarrassment to Pakistan on a number of occasions. However, Pakistan would vastly prefer the Taliban over an Afghan government with close ties to New Delhi. Pakistan's intelligence ties to the Afghan Taliban are an asset Islamabad is entirely willing to use to prevent what it considers excessive Indian influence in Kabul.

India, for its part, attaches great importance to its historically friendly relations with Afghanistan, and is one of the largest contributors to Afghan reconstruction ($1.3 billion as of early 2010). India would see the restoration of a Pakistan-dominated government in Kabul as a serious strategic setback and potential additional channel for terrorist attacks on India. The competition is not just philosophical: there is evidence of Pakistani involvement in two attacks on Indians in Afghanistan, one against the Indian Embassy in July 2008, and a second one on two guest houses frequented by Indian NGO and aid workers in February 2010.

Both countries have historical models they find attractive. Pakistan would like to recreate the primacy it enjoyed in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime of the late 1990s. India looks back before the Soviet inva-

sion of Afghanistan to several decades of close India–Afghanistan relations (at Pakistan's expense). Both models are unrealistic today. Karzai's government is signalling that it wants balance: decent relations but not too close an embrace with Pakistan, and a continuation of the broad economic and cultural ties with India. Most importantly, Karzai wants an end to the proxy wars, as he underlined publicly on visits to Islamabad and New Delhi in March and April 2010. This quest for balance and resistance to a dominant Pakistani role would probably continue even with a change of government in Kabul. Afghan tribal and clan leaders have been consistent only in their desire to avoid subordination to foreigners. Many of today's warlords, and some personalities now linked to the Taliban, have colourful histories of switching sides during the turbulent years that started with the Soviet invasion. A number of them moved back and forth between pro- and anti-Pakistan postures.

Reducing the scope and toxicity of India–Pakistan competition in Afghanistan is something the Afghans want, and would benefit the United States and NATO. But since the problem stems largely from intelligence operations, getting everyone to agree on a non-interference policy will not mean that such a policy is actually enforced. What is needed is a long-term diplomatic campaign by the United States and the interested NATO countries, if possible with the support of Russia and China, that could include an understanding on the geographic division of aid to Afghanistan, a functional division of labour, and a push for expanded education and training of Afghan civilians in both India and Pakistan. India could focus mainly on the western half of the country, and Pakistan chiefly on the areas near the Pakistan–Afghan border; India could concentrate chiefly on economic assistance, with security assistance provided primarily by the United States and NATO, in coordination with Pakistan; quiet consultations between New Delhi and Islamabad in the manner of their anti-terrorism talks could at least provide a setting where the two rivals could address the proxy war when they are ready to do so; and publicising information about the involvement of Pakistani and Indian intelligence agencies in attacks on the other country's citizens in Afghanistan could make the proxy war a public embarrassment.

Russia and China have their own equities in Afghanistan, and China has been developing a potentially significant economic role. They are unlikely to join in a diplomatic campaign of this sort just to pull US chestnuts out of the fire. But if it is presented as a way to keep Afghanistan's neighbours from preventing peace, they might find it attractive. At the end of the day, the task of fixing Afghanistan will depend primarily on the reconstruction effort and the government's ability to attract a critical mass of support. Discouraging spoilers is essential to success.