

AFGHANISTAN AND THE DECEMBER REVIEW:

Making the Right Judgments

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One should never judge whether the glass is half empty or half full while it is still being poured. The review of progress in Afghanistan due in December 2010 is definitely a case of prematurely assessing the situation and can provide only a limited picture of whether the new strategy will work.

There will be positive indicators. It would be amazing if a massive increase in the US troop presence and in US spending did not have such effects at the local level. There has been obvious progress in some districts in Helmand and RC East, and in shaping the campaign to take control of Kandahar. The number of trainers and facilities for Afghan forces has been sharply increased, and increases in Special Forces, intelligence assets, and weapons like UCAVs and smart MRL rounds have done serious damage to the Taliban and Haqqani networks even at senior levels. Civil-military coordination is finally becoming more of a reality, and real efforts are underway to reform the contracting processes that have created massive Afghan corruption and waste.

Such indicators provided important preliminary signs of progress during a similar crisis in the Iraq War. They cannot be disregarded even if they so far reflect only limited and potentially ephemeral progress.

At the same time, other insurgencies have shown that short term gains and largely tactical victories are meaningless unless they can be scaled up to win an entire conflict, sustained over time, and then provide a lasting transition to a reasonable degree of security and stability. It is one of the ironies of Vietnam that it achieved every goal the US is now seeking to achieve in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. When the US left, it had the equivalent of "Vietnam good enough": a defeated insurgency, an outside enemy forced to the conference table and a formal agreement to political accommodation, a "strong" set of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) security forces, a democratic government, a reasonable level of human rights, and not one but two Nobel peace prizes.

None of this mattered when a combination of internal weaknesses and a cut off of US funding eventually crippled the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN. Moreover, the North Vietnamese and remnants of the Viet Cong proved far more adaptive and resilient over time than the US calculated. As a result, the US "victory" in Vietnam proved as hollow as Batista's defeats of Castro, or the long series of Chinese Nationalist and Japanese defeats of the Chinese communists. As may still be the case in Iraq, the US lacked the strategic patience and domestic political support to turn an apparent victory into lasting gains.

Providing a New Degree of Honesty and Transparency

These problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan scarcely mean that the US needs to repeat its experience in Vietnam. They do mean, however, that the US needs to be as demanding and realistic as possible in judging what the December review can reveal. As part of that realism, the Obama Administration needs to admit that its "conditions-based" deadline for beginning transition to Afghan responsibility was never realistic and is doing more

harm than good. It needs to start being honest with the American people, its allies, and the Afghans and Pakistanis and present meaningful plans and timescales for action.

This requires a fundamental shift in the current attitude of the White House and to some extent in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The White House has blocked ISAF attempts to issue unclassified monthly and quarterly status reports, directing ISAF to keep them classified and restrict their distribution. It may also have been responsible for the strange delays in releasing the semiannual Department of Defense report to Congress on the war, which led to two contradictory reports covering events six months apart being issued within the same two weeks.

Whereas the Bush Administration reported exaggerated or “spun” progress, the Obama Administration has suppressed information. Since June, ISAF has reacted by steadily restricting the distribution of unclassified command and other status briefings – reverting to the constant efforts to “control the message” that dominated its reporting until the reviews that led to the new strategy.

This situation if there is to be anything like a message that anyone can trust. The net effect of what is happening is that there is either no official message or one that increasing looks like the constant positive spin of the morning follies in Vietnam. At the same time, the message most people actually receive is media reporting which often accurately describes the problems in the war and in a given tactical area but lacks broad perspective.

Officials in Washington, the US country team, and ISAF need to use the December report to make a new start in honest reporting about what has happened to date, and to start creating far more realistic expectations about the future.

Addressing Key Issues Using Real World Timelines

As the first part of that honesty, the US needs to admit that it is roughly a year behind the schedule that many had hoped for in drafting the new strategy.

The reasons for this delay include:

- **The sheer scale of the neglect**, massive under-resourcing, annual reinvention of unexecuted conceptual plans, spin, and denial that occurred between 2001 and 2009.
- **The length of the Presidential review in the US**, which delayed action on the new strategy by roughly six months and then called for goals and timelines that were over-demanding and created exaggerated expectations while interfering with realistic planning and execution of many elements of the campaign.
- **The uncertainties caused by a largely arbitrary deadline for capping the US force presence and beginning withdrawal in mid-2011**. While the President has

qualified this deadline as “conditions-based,” it forced ISAF to first reorganize much of its planning and then to try to artificially accelerate key programs like expanding the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

- **The fact that no one had ever really implemented a strategy of “shape, win, hold, build and transition” on this scale before**, and this was not a matter of establishing a troop to task ratio, but rather a civil-military resource to experiment ratio. Moreover, the initial timelines for transition were far closer to 2014-2015 than 2011, allowing far more tolerance in actually implementing the new strategy.
- **The lack of real world, effective and integrated civil-military leadership, plans, and management tools** at the US, allied, ISAF, and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) levels. This is in addition to stove-piping and feuding within given organizations and commands. This situation now seems to be in the process of being corrected, but the lack of effective coordination and plans seriously hurt the initial operation in Marja and takes time to correct.
- **The sheer difficulty of trying to implement the new strategy in a complex tribal environment where limits in civil and military resources forced hard choices on priorities and scale of effort on a national and regional basis**, the experimental nature of “shape, win, hold, build and transition,” the need to take time to determine what approaches were actually successful, the need to take time to build trust and local acceptance, the need to adapt tactics to reduce civilian casualties, and the special problems imposed by shifting from FOB-oriented operations to major population centers like Kandahar.
- **The real world limits on how quickly the US could deploy forces** to Afghanistan with the proper facilities, supplies, and support. The US military build-up has been a major success by any realistic standard, but some “friction” and delay was inevitable.
- **The wide range of tensions within the ISAF alliance**, and the resulting failure of a number of allied forces and aid teams to actually implement the new strategy, compounded by growing domestic pressure to leave Afghanistan or curtail military and aid operations that might lead to casualties.
- **The problems created by the perception that the President’s deadline meant the US might well begin to withdraw in 2011**, and that its level of commitment was at least uncertain.
- **Continuing Afghan and Pakistani fears the US will leave before it achieves any kind of lasting victory**. There is still serious Afghan and Pakistani uncertainty about how long the US and allied forces and aid efforts will continue, compounded by allied announcements of withdrawals, failures to meet aid commitments, and failures to provide critical personnel like trainers.

- **An unexpected crisis over the Afghan Presidential election**, which delayed Afghan support and execution of the new strategy, followed by a continuing level of tension between the Obama administration and Karzai government, and distrust and tension at many levels. This has been compounded by later disputes and tensions over issues like anti-corruption, contracting, and the use of private security forces – leaving a climate of continued tension and mistrust. It remains to be seen whether the parliamentary elections in 2010 will have a similar divisive effect, at least at the local level.
- **Pakistan’s uncertain commitment to the war.** Pakistan remained divided over the level and kinds of support it should provide, and made more limited progress in a number of key areas than many hoped through 2009 and then after shaping the new strategy. Events have not resolved the differences between US/ISAF and Pakistani goals and perceptions of how the war should be fought, or eliminated Pakistani concerns over how long the US will stay. These problems have also been compounded by growing internal tensions within the Pakistani government, and by the impact of the recent flood.
- **The US, ISAF, and UNAMA lacked a coherent and meaningful anti-corruption strategy.** They also failed to address the fact the US and its allies caused much of this Afghan corruption through a lack of effective contracting, lack of attention to validating contract and aid needs, lack of effective management, and lack of meaningful measures of effectiveness. The recent SIGAR report detailing the inability of DoD and USAID to properly account for the \$18 Billion spent thus far on reconstruction, and assess its impact, highlights the severity of this problem. These problems are only now beginning to receive serious attention and are at least a year away from having any broad impact.
- **The training base for all of the elements of the ANSF was grossly under-manned and under-resourced** through early 2010 in ways that only became fully clear once the new strategy began to be implemented. There was also a lack of effective partnering capability once units left the training facility. This situation is rapidly improving in some ways, but there are still massive shortages of fully qualified trainers, and “partnering” remains a work in progress. It also remains to be seen whether the Afghan Army and ANCOF forces being generated will really meet their goals and overcome their past problems with attrition on a lasting basis, and when they will really be ready to carry out a successful transition.
- **The impact of the failures of some allies to meet commitments to provide aid and trainers**, alter rules of engagement, deal with expanding Taliban presence, and coordinate military and aid activity with ISAF, the Afghan government, and new strategy. Even today, the slow arrival of expert trainers threatens the success of efforts to create the skills and specialized elements in the ANSF that are necessary for any meaningful transition to the Afghan Army beyond the battalion-sized combat unit level.

- **The lack of effective plans to deal with the need to create an mix effective mix of police, formal and informal justice systems** through mid-2009, and the ability to provide essential government services, and the decoupling of police training from the rule of law aid program. It took nearly a year to begin to seriously address this issue and to begin to counter the role of the Taliban in providing the prompt justice needed to main civil order in key parts of Afghanistan. This still involves largely experimental efforts in adapting mixes of a formal and informal justice system and in creating local policing.
- **A failure to develop honest or meaningful systems for reporting on the progress of the ANSF.** Reporting and metrics on the real world capabilities of the ANSF were lacking and inadequate. ISAF did reform its ANSF metrics system earlier this year, replacing the overly optimistic CM system with a more flexible CUAT system. But it has not released CUAT results publicly. Moreover, it is not clear how well this system will deal with the critical problem of reporting in the political ties, loyalties, ethnicity, sect, and internal stability of given commanders and units. Creating a credible standard for such reporting, ensuring the hand-off from one set of advisors to another, and combining these assessments with the actual history of war fighting or police behavior is critical. Previous rating systems have focused on training, supplies, facilities, and personnel level and not the real world needs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The failure of the CM system to address these issues, for example, made it far more misleading than useful. The capabilities of the ANSF are one of the most important metrics of this war, and the December review must discuss them honestly and in detail in order to remain credible.
- **Critical problems in recruiting and training qualified US and allied civilians, giving them proper support and facilities,** and shaping civil-military effective programs. Once again, major progress is now being made. A SIGAR report in October 2010 found that, “U.S. agencies had deployed nearly 67 percent of the personnel identified as part of the civilian uplift, and to date, have largely met life and operational support needs in the field. Sixteen agencies, representing 8 departments, were providing personnel to fill 626 new positions identified as part of the civilian uplift. The uplift will be implemented over two phases and contributes to an increase from 320 personnel in January 2009 to approximately 1500 personnel by January 2012, according to current estimates. The first phase of the uplift ended in December 2009; the current phase began in January 2010 and will be completed in December 2011. Of the new positions, 294 will be located in Kabul, with the remaining positions distributed across locations throughout the country, such as provincial reconstruction teams and district support teams. As of September 9, 2010, a reported 418 personnel have deployed to Afghanistan, including 227 personnel in the field. However, at least 33% of the personnel needed are not yet present, and some of the goals initially set for

end-2010 will now only be met by sometime towards the end of 2011.¹

- **The impact of growing pressure for some form of political settlement or accommodation with the Taliban and other insurgents**, new tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the issue, and Afghan and allied reluctance to fully commit to all aspects of the new strategy. The Afghan government has only begun to organize for the reconciliation of high-level insurgents, and has so far failed to create the institutions and programs necessary to attract mid- and lower-level fighters and reintegrate them into Afghan society.
- **The sheer depth of Afghanistan's economic problems and the lack of basic government capacity at every level** – issues which have become far more real in dealing with “shape, win, hold, build and transition” now that the US and ISAF are actually taking meaningful levels of action in the field, and pushing for real Afghan capability to take the lead. These efforts, however, still reflect a critical lack of coordination between allied aid efforts, PRTs, and military forces. UNAMAS has still not demonstrated that it can coordinate and manage key aid efforts. Requirement and projects lack validation, contracting is filled with waste and corruption, and meaningful measures of effectiveness are still lacking. This was grimly reflected in almost all of the districts that are the key focus of the present campaign in the April 2010 report by the Department of Defense (p. 60), as was the lack of effective Afghan governance (p. 43).
- **Planning for the transitioning of provinces to Afghan control in ways that created a high risk that the US and ISAF will make the same politicized and premature claims to success that they did in Iraq, where such transfers initially were little more than hollow propaganda gestures.** In one case (Basra) a premature transfer to Iraqi control led to massive fighting across much of southern Iraq. Kabul province is an example of just this kind of risky and hollow transfer. Real world progress is being made in such transfers at the community and now the district level, but such transitions cannot be rushed without losing gains in terms of Afghan local governance and security.
- **Failures to develop adequate reporting systems, narratives, and metrics.** The failure to provide honest and transparent reporting was compounded by a lack of meaningful net assessment and intelligence analysis that looked beyond the tactical threat. This situation has been improved in many ways since the spring of 2009, but one US and ISAF effort after another is still being made to find metrics with insufficient regard to their real world analytic value or the degree of competition in gathering data and trying to translate into nominal nation-wide results. As is the case in Iraq, it is unclear that any given chain of reporting is credible, and none are transparent enough to allow outside review to act as a control on the product.

¹ See Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction U.S. Civilian Uplift in Afghanistan Is Progressing but Some Key Issues Merit Further Examination as Implementation Continues, SIGAR Audit-11-2 October 2010.

These problem have been reduced since mid-2009, but they have scarcely gone away and they still create a serious cumulative a risk of failure. An honest December report must explicitly address each of them and describe the real levels of progress in each area. At the same time, the report must focus on clearly verifiable progress and realistic goals – “under-promise and over-deliver” – and not try to move towards a perceived deadline, create new exaggerated expectations, or use the kind of metrics that appear favorable in the short term but risk becoming an embarrassment by next summer. It must focus on key measures of progress, but it must also have enough depth and detail to be convincing. There are no magic metrics or narratives that substitute for content and analysis.

If it does not, the December report will have earned every bit of the distrust it will receive and there is too much distrust already. A recent poll by the German Marshall Fund of the United States – Transatlantic Trends -- found that US optimism about stabilizing Afghanistan dropped from 56% to 51% between 2009 and 2010 – part of a steady drop in recent years. British support dropped from 37% to 34%, French support from 30% to 18%, and German support from 23% to 10%. Public opinion polls do not win wars, but they can reflect a lack of popular support that will lose them.

So far, the US and ISAF have done far too little to make their message convincing. They are not “controlling the narrative,” they are losing the war.

Addressing the Grand Strategic Rationale for Pursuing the War

One cannot simply concentrate on the real progress now underway, and ignore the past. All of these issues still impact heavily on the ability to implement a new strategy and effective population-oriented strategy, and some are likely to continue to threaten its success throughout the length of the war. The fact remains, however, that we will know within a year whether enough of them can be overcome to offer a credible probability of a favorable outcome – at least to the extent of creating conditions where Afghanistan will be reasonably secure and stable and both Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be sanctuaries for a major international terrorist effort by Al Qaida.

This, however, raises another *critical* set of issues that the December report and all future reporting on the war needs to address far more frankly. There needs to be a clear statement of the objective in continuing the war, at least the outline of an initial transition plan, and a set of grand strategic goals. Talking about “Afghan good enough” in general terms is only marginally better than planning for “Afghan impossible” – which has been the substitute for meaningful thinking about achieving a useful grand strategic result over the last nine years.

The key question is this: Can the US and its allies achieve enough of a probability of transforming tactical victory and temporary stability into a lasting outcome at a reasonable cost in aid and an advisory-military presence? There are no certainties in war or in the initial outcome of war, but the costs and risks of this conflict are already so high

that some explicit analysis of both how to define a meaningful grand strategic result and the probability of achieving this result are necessary.

Moreover, this thinking needs to be put in a broader regional and global strategic context. The issues involved are complex and are addressed in depth in another CSIS study entitled “**Grand Strategy in the Afghan, Pakistan, and Iraq Wars: The End State Fallacy,**” which is available on the CSIS web site at:

http://csis.org/files/publication/101013_End_State_Fallacy.pdf

The present conflict cannot be justified, however, simply on the basis of 9/11, or the fact Al Qa’ida’s leadership is currently in Pakistan. There has to be a credible set of longer-term objectives and defining what this means is as important as being realistic about progress to date and setting achievable near-term goals.

Giving Victory a Chance

It is essential to point out that wars do involve risk and uncertainty and that victory generally goes to the side that does the best job of facing these realities and adapting to them. The need for better reporting that explicitly addresses past problems and future grand strategic goals is not an argument against the new strategy or for abandoning the war.

The fact that drafting future progress reports requires those involved to provide a new degree of transparency and honesty -- and inevitably this means some negative reporting as well as positive reporting -- does not mean the US and its allies have or will fail in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. Once again, the glass is still being poured. There is real progress as well as real problems, and it is far too early to condemn the new strategy or call for the kind of political accommodation that simply provides a façade for withdrawal and defeat.

That said, it is also a fact that the US and ISAF role in Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be allowed to become a morass, funded by a blank check. At some point by the end of 2011, the US will have to deal with a war all too similar to Iraq in that many of its allies will be gone or going. The US and its remaining allies will have to decide whether there is a credible chance of overcoming enough of its problems to win, and it will have had a year to decide whether it is worth pursuing the war over enough time to achieve some meaningful degree of grand strategic outcome -- to the extent that such future events are within US influence and control.

The December 2010 report can only be a stepping stone, but next December's report must be decisive – in supporting a decision to either to stay on a long-term basis or to go. This, however, leads to two cautions.

First, those who argue to stay must be ready to face the fact that it will mean a serious force commitment through at least 2015, unless the opposition collapses far faster than is normally the case. It also means continuing major aid efforts through at least 2020. At the

same time, no such decision can be written in stone. US and allied commitments will remain optional and not a vital strategic interest. Those who advocate staying the course must be ready for similar annual reviews in the future -- each of which must be progressively more demanding of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Second, those who argue for leaving must be honest about the high probability that all of the past and current efforts to encourage democracy, human rights, and development will probably collapse -- regardless of what the Taliban and other insurgent appear to agree to. The war cannot be won by military means alone. This is equally true of political accommodation, however, and particularly at a time when the enemy feels it is winning, the quality of Afghan and Pakistani governance is low, and Afghan and/or Pakistani forces have not demonstrated they can either endure or turn tactical victories into civil-military success.

Moreover, far too many who talk about exit strategies forget that every exit strategy inevitably involves some new destination with new security problems and risks. Running away from a problem is only a sound strategy if there is somewhere better and safer to run to.