

## IMPRESSIONS FROM A BRIEF VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN AND BAHRAIN

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During the last week in March and the first week in April, I participated in a trip organized by the Council of Foreign Relations and Centcom to NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Afghanistan, and Bahrain. The focus of the trip was Afghanistan, where we met with General Allen, Ambassador Crocker, Afghani military leaders, and personnel from regional military headquarters in the south and east of Afghanistan. All were highly competent and impressive individuals. We flew in a helicopter over the eastern border area to get some sense of the landscape and entry points of the Taliban and other hostile elements. In addition to the formal briefings, I had the opportunity to talk privately with lower ranking American officers. What follows are the personal conclusions I reached based on what I learned from this trip and from extensive direct experiences with insurgencies in other parts of the world in decades past. My last trip to Afghanistan was in 2005.

### Observations:

There appear to be five rationales for our continued and projected military involvement in Afghanistan. 1) To prevent Al Qaeda from resuming its presence in Afghanistan, where they could plot new attacks such as 9/11 on America and her allies; 2) To prevent Taliban from reimposing its harsh, medieval restrictions on women and girls; 3) To mitigate damage to America's prestige by a perceived defeat in Afghanistan; 4) To prevent a broader civil war in Afghanistan between the country's various tribal and religious elements; and 5) To maintain some minimal limitations on Afghanistan's vast narcotics production and exports.

### Discussion:

It is clear that Al Qaeda has spread far beyond its original main base in Afghanistan, reaching into Pakistan, Yemen, Somaliland, North Africa, and elsewhere. Al Qaeda remains an evil force directed against American presence in the Middle East and allied regimes, and is engaged in a campaign to bleed the United States of financial resources and morale in response to carefully planned and targeted attacks. Given Al Qaeda's broad geographic presence, it seems unlikely to me that our military presence in Afghanistan is the main deterrent against future 9/11 type attacks, which could be organized and planned in many locations outside Afghanistan.

Concerning women and girls: The truly medieval attitude of Taliban leaders toward women and girls has added to opposition toward the Taliban in many parts of Afghanistan outside the rural

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Pashtun tribal areas that incubate the Taliban. Any negotiation with the Taliban for a future political role in Afghanistan will have to take into account the strongly held views of millions of Afghans that do not support their extreme attitudes toward women, girls, education, religion, and tribes. Should the Taliban fail to take the differing views of urban women and cultural differences and interests of other tribes into account in such a negotiation, they would likely encounter a renewed civil war, with elements covertly supported by various neighbors. Should the Taliban engage in future external provocations, they could also expect air attacks on their public buildings in Kabul and elsewhere, and stepped up arms deliveries to their tribal enemies. That may not be an appealing prospect for them. Any future external aid in rebuilding Afghanistan would very likely be contingent on some moderation in their traditional views on women's rights and other important issues.

Concerning narcotics: It is hard to imagine a worse drug situation than that now prevailing in Afghanistan. During their earlier rule in Kabul, the Taliban attempted to stifle the drug trade on religious grounds.

Concerning corruption: Forty years ago during a trip to Vietnam, Herman Kahn suggested to me that there were two kinds of corruption: a moderate amount that greases the wheels; and a more massive variety that discredits the government, overwhelms the economy with staggering pay off burdens, and cripples the working of governmental services.

Given the tenuous and fragile nature of the intra-provincial administrative networks, and the tepid support for the Kabul leadership, the temptation to resort to corruption on an epic scale is evident. As the term of President Karzai draws to its inevitable final end in 2014, and as American military support ebbs, the temptation by some to make hay while the sun shines increases. There are only two major sources of wealth in Afghanistan's crippled economy: foreign infusions and narcotics. Stealing from the first may not be deemed a mortal sin by Afghanistan's xenophobic culture, and the narcotics trade is inextricably bound up with corruption at all levels.

For an economy and regime utterly dependent upon foreign aid, military support, and good will, such corruption is potentially a fatal burden. Repairing it, after it has imbedded itself into so many aspects of the administration, justice system, and private economy may be impossible in the time that is available. This adds yet another highly negative element to the calculus for ultimate success in the coalition efforts in Afghanistan.

Fifty years ago, Ed Lansdale was able to break the back of a communist insurgency in the Philippines. His indispensable partner in this undertaking was President Magsaysay, a person of massive integrity and ability who was able to rally the good people of his country behind him. Is there such an individual available in Afghanistan to pick up the flag after President Karzai departs in 2014?

Concerning the role of neighboring countries: Pakistan, India, Iran, and others have become central elements in the Afghanistan conflict. Experience in coping with insurgencies in places

such as Greece and Vietnam suggest that it is extremely difficult to defeat an insurgency when there is a neighboring country able or forced to serve as a trans-border refuge, recruitment, training, resupply, and rehabilitation center for the insurgency. When Tito turned against Stalin, Yugoslavia ceased to provide such a facility for Greek communist insurgents, and the movement was crushed. The same was true of the domestic elements of the Viet Cong when Cambodian sovereignty was ignored by the Nixon Administration, a process greatly aided by Project Phoenix.

Concerning Project Phoenix: This was a CIA led effort in South Vietnam aimed at arresting the Viet Cong infrastructure throughout the rural parts of Vietnam. This project involved careful intelligence to identify such individuals and sudden night raids to surround the targeted village and arrest the local Viet Cong leaders. It appears that a similar effort is now underway in Afghanistan. Its effectiveness in arresting Taliban leaders is undeniable. Efforts to transfer leadership of such raids to Afghani forces, including judicial approval for the raids, obviously raises some questions about security and effectiveness of such future operations. Its continued success is absolutely essential for any long-term hope of success against the Taliban.

The Pashtun element, which forms the ethnic base of the Taliban, straddles the border. Pakistan views these regions as part of its hinterland and strategic depth in the ceaseless war with India over Kashmir. At a minimum, Pakistan's powerful ISI intelligence service wants to preserve the good will of Taliban leaders should they eventually regain power in Kabul and as an asset in the event of a post coalition power struggle. The non-Pashtun elements of the Pakistan army were always a military threat to the border tribes, and injecting them again into the Waziristan area guarantees a hostile reception. Hence the large casualties that accompanied recent past Pakistani army moves in the border area. No occupying power has ever dominated this area, which always has enjoyed a defacto degree of federated independence, whether with Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Bottom line: Both for reasons of high policy and for reasons of military expediency, it seems unlikely that Pakistan will ever seal the border or police Taliban recruitment and deployment operations in border areas of nominal Pakistani sovereignty. Without clearing up the cross border refuge and recruitment centers, it seems to me very unlikely that a permanent victory over the Taliban and related entities will be achieved.

Afghani military leaders in this region have stated that the Taliban strategy is to keep a degree of negative pressure on the Afghani government program to replace the departing American forces with local troops and police. Attacks, assassinations, and infiltration are the means to this end.

A similar strategy was once called Vietnamization. It failed in Vietnam because we later pulled out our forces, cut off our money, weapons, and air power, thus demoralizing the South Vietnamese forces. Seventeen North Vietnamese divisions then poured over the northern frontier and seized key population centers in the South, effectively ending the war with their victory.

In the related case of Soviet Afghanistan, the Soviet supported Afghanistan ruler, Nashibullah, held on after the Soviet army withdrew for two years, with the help of their local police and army allies. But when the Russians facing catastrophic budget problems at home, cut off the funding

for their former allies' army and police units, they collapsed. This defeat accompanied a protracted civil war between the Pakistan assisted Pashtun Taliban forces and the northern tribes during which Kabul was taken and lost five times, leaving behind a devastated urban area.

This scenario could be repeated in the years ahead.

The current Afghani President Mr. Karzai is scheduled to leave office in 2014 when his constitutional limit of two terms is reached. Several candidates have indicated an interest in succeeding him, including his brother. However, should he be assassinated or otherwise die before he leaves office, or were subsequent elections to secure a new leader fail to achieve broad support, there is a serious danger of a civil war. Karzai's major skill appears to involve tribal politicking, which in turn involves large-scale financial inducements for cooperation. These leave a strong flavor of corruption among foreign donors. Given his personal limitations, it is not clear what other instruments he has for keeping the fractious country under minimal cohesion, but it exceeds Herman Khan's definition of acceptable corruption.

When President Diem was assassinated in Vietnam, all of the connections and relationships he had cultivated throughout the country for a decade vanished with him. Every succeeding government in Saigon's revolving door, operated with less and less reach into the countryside. Eventually the only cohesive element left in Vietnam was the American presence. When it vanished, the military elements in South Vietnam, which had learned to fight an American style war, including lavish air and artillery resources, were unable to cope with the invading North Vietnamese army.

Obviously, there are important lessons from the Vietnam era for our current efforts in Afghanistan with the recurring temptation in some quarters to pull the plug on a disappointing President Karzai.

As long as American troops, money, air power, and reconnaissance capabilities are deployed in Afghanistan, it seems unlikely that Kabul will be overrun. Obviously the Taliban does not have 17 army division to send across the border. Instead they will attempt to inflict death by 1,000 cuts on their enemies. As the American presence fades, attacks on Kabul and other urban centers will increase. Infiltration by the Taliban of local police and army units will intensify with more incidents of secret Talibani sympathizers turning their guns and bombs onto loyal elements. One of the key concerns in the effort to transfer responsibilities to the newly recruited and empowered Afghani army and police units has to do with latent tribal and historical tensions between the Pashtun and other tribal elements. Will Tazik and other tribal origin troops be welcomed over time in Pashtun areas, or gradually be perceived as another form of foreign occupation? Pakistan is likely to support the Taliban in these efforts if only to prevent India's allies in the north of Afghanistan from gaining control over the Capital and the country.

Were India and Pakistan able to find a solution to the Kashmir problem, and otherwise reconcile, the Afghanistan problem would be far easier to resolve. But despite the recent visit of Pakistan's Prime Minister to India, both India and Pakistan have weak governments at present and appear to lack the ability to make the necessary compromises in Kashmir. So they both fight on with covert efforts and militarization and consume vast amounts of national wealth in the process.

For both countries, Afghanistan is a side show in the more central conflict, but a side show where both countries are mounting efforts to preserve influence.

Without India and Pakistan cooperation, I do not see how a lasting peace in Afghanistan can be achieved. The country is more likely to fragment along tribal lines with the Taliban eventually over running Kabul and Pashtun enclaves, and India's allies holding on in the northern part of the country where India has recently obtained important mineral concessions and influence.

Top U.S. military and diplomatic leaders in Afghanistan hope to achieve a successful "Vietnamizations" of the police and army, and provide enough long-term U.S. aid and arms support to defend the country against a resurgent Taliban.

Loyal Afghani military leaders have said they believe that the Taliban will gradually build up a larger cross border military force, using the madrassa Koran schools as recruitment centers and deploy them in ever large numbers after the American military contingents are dramatically reduced. They assume the ISI in Pakistan will support this effort.

Concerning Pakistan: Nuclear armed, ISI dominated Pakistan is increasingly under pressure from militant domestic Islamic elements with perceived grievances that are both local and regional. Necessary U.S. operations along the Afghani border areas and the surprise U.S. coup involving radical Islamic hero Osama bin Laden have inflamed Islamic and nationalistic passions inside Pakistan. Pakistan indeed is riven by factionalism, corruption, paranoia, and poverty. Nuclear weapons and the past dissemination of nuclear technology by leading Pakistani nuclear scientists are an alarming reality and constitute the main U.S. reason for maintaining ties with the country. Our presence in Afghanistan with its inevitable frictions with Pakistan is a neuralgic element. If Pakistan's nuclear weapons and technology and virulent Islamic elements represent our major policy concern, Afghanistan seems a second tier issue by comparison, and one that does not positively contribute to the management of the main concern.

Concerning Iran: Iran supported our earlier efforts to defeat the Taliban, due in part to earlier tension between Iranian diplomats and Taliban authorities, religious conflicts, and Iranian efforts to enhance influence in Persian speaking parts of the country.

Recently, as tension over Iranian nuclear issues rose, the Iranians mounted efforts in several parts of the world, including Washington, to demonstrate their reach. In Afghanistan, they left a highly advanced roadside explosive device unconcealed on a highway where they knew it would be found by American forces. These were the kinds of lethal devices that were sent in large numbers to aid anti-American militia fighting in Iraq and which caused large numbers of U.S. casualties. This device was presumably left as a warning that if tensions between Iran and the U.S. mount, they had the ability to replicate what they did in Iraq to American and coalition forces in Afghanistan. The roadside bombs being used by the Taliban now are primitive compared with the Iranian versions.

Should there be a civil war in Afghanistan, it is possible that Iran will support some of the anti-Pashtun, anti-Taliban tribal elements, contributing to the subsequent violence and carnage.

Final Comments:

When you talk privately with young U.S. officers, you hear split messages. Some say we must honor the sacrifices of earlier U.S. casualties and fight on to victory. More of them whisper in your ear that “we’ve done about all we can do over here, and we need an exit strategy.”

We have the ability with remaining troops, air power, and financial assistance to help provide the necessary conditions for an orderly withdrawal of our forces, as envisaged by the Administration.

It is possible that close and intense diplomatic interaction with both Afghanistan’s neighbors and friendly regimes, including NATO can help bridge to a new coalition government in Kabul that includes elements of the Taliban.

On the other hand, a complete victory over the Taliban and related elements does not appear to me practical under current circumstances, given Pakistan’s attitude and Pashtuni cross border realities.

But that does not mean that we are without ability to influence the final outcome, including some limited moderation of the Taliban’s earlier extreme views on women and other issues. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General John Allen are providing outstanding leadership in our efforts in Afghanistan. But they cannot perform miracles and should not be expected to do so.

We owe them enough support so that they do not face the need for a chaotic exit, a power vacuum in Kabul, and scenes reminiscent of the final days in Saigon. Large-scale capital flight and the collapse of real estate prices in Kabul are worrying signs.

Again, the danger is not a massive attack, but a steady increase in violence and infiltration: death of the current regime by a thousand cuts, followed by lengthy civil war and ultimate fragmentation of the state.

Concerning Bahrain: The vital headquarters of the 5<sup>th</sup> fleet located in the Persian Gulf is based in Bahrain, a Sunni dominated kingdom, ruling over a restive Shiite majority, a few of whom undoubtedly have links with fellow Shiites in Iran. These elements attempted an Iran-supported coup 30 years ago.

The Saudi leadership was loath to see a nearby fellow Sunni kingdom overthrown by restive Shiites and sent over a massive police and military force to crush the Shiite insurrection a year ago in March.

It seems unlikely that Saudi attitudes will change toward Bahrain. It is also important to remember that cooperative U.S. links to the Bahraini kingdom go back for 60 years. There appears to be little local popular opposition to our vital naval base there. However, a visible effort to support the Shiites political demands by the U.S. could poison the relationship with current rulers and potentially imperil the base itself. This base is vital to guard the oil routes out of the Persian Gulf, and the stakes are titanic.

This suggests that any human rights activism on behalf of local Shiites by Washington should be a very low profile effort. The King is our long-time ally. A future Shiite democracy could be more problematic situation for our strategic interests, particularly while tensions with Iran continue at such a high level.