

General Campbell, the SASC, and the Last Chance for Afghanistan

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There is no certain path to success in Afghanistan. In fact, its political problems, failures in governance, economic problems, corruption, and the weaknesses in its security forces all make any U.S. effort uncertain and any success difficult at best. There are, however, certain paths to failure and this is the path we are now on.

The deadlines, force cuts, and constraints on U.S. forces that President Obama created long before the current conditions in Afghanistan became clear are an almost certain way to lose. As Kunduz has shown, the Afghan forces have been rushed into being and simply are not ready to assume the level of responsibility thrust upon them by having U.S. and allied combat forces leave at the end of 2014.

Worse, the Afghan government remains divided and ineffective, its political future remains uncertain, the Afghan economy is suffering sharply from cuts in aid and military spending, security is deteriorating, and power brokers, a narco-economy, and one of the most corrupt structures of governance in the world all present major challenges.

But, the Taliban and other insurgent groups are far worse, have their own divisions, and are vulnerable as well. If the United States shifts away from fixed deadlines for reducing all of its train and assist efforts, actually adds enough advisors to do the job and changes their role and mission, provides sufficient combat airpower, and sustains financial aid, Afghanistan may survive all of its failures as a state and become able to stand on its own. The odds are marginal, not good. However, shifting from fixed deadlines that will force defeat to a conditions-based U.S. assistance effort could still make the difference.

This is why the appearance of General John F. Campbell – the current commander of the Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces—Afghanistan—before the House Armed Service Committee (HASC) and Senate Armed Service Committee (SASC) is so critical. This is October, 2015.

The President's deadlines call for the already inadequate U.S. force of 9,800 troops to be cut in half by the end of 2015, and all forces except a small office of military assistance by the end of 2016. Unless this decision is reversed almost immediately, Afghanistan will become a lost cause.

This time the HASC and SASC need to do more than posture, make partisan points, and indulge in visibility exercises. It needs to hold the kind of hearing that will challenge the President's past deadlines and current limits to the role of U.S. forces head on. With luck, General Campbell will already be bringing a message from the White House that the President has given up on trying to end the U.S. role in Afghanistan before he leaves office, and has shifted to a conditions-based U.S. commitment.

Unless conditions change radically in Afghanistan, however, shifting from a deadlines-based strategy to a conditions-based strategy will take far more U.S. forces through at least 2017-2018 than the 5,000 troops and the "lily pads" General Dempsey recommended to the President before he left his position as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

The HASC and SASC need to take a bipartisan approach to questioning where the war is heading and what now needs to be done. They need to focus on the future, and not the past. In practice, this means the HASC and the SASC need to question General Campbell in depth about the following three options:

- ***Adding advisors rather than cutting them.*** Providing enough advisors to provide support at the major combat unit or Kandak level, and at all of the critical levels necessary to help the Afghan forces become combat effective. The United States and its allies rushed far too many of these forces into being, focused on generating more forces rather than combat effectiveness, and then rushed out before Afghan ground troops were close to being ready – as well as left years before the Afghan air force could become effective.

There is no magic number here, but the proper figure is more likely to be around 13,000-15,000 rather than 9,800. It will also probably need to stay for several years, and involve real experts in combat –

special forces, rangers, Afghan hands – that can help develop combat leaders and combat capability, ensure the flow of ammunition and supplies, and help ensure reinforcements go to the right place and actually come when needed.

This means putting some U.S. advisors into places where they will be at far more risk, and taking casualties, and General Campbell should be asked about these risks and their cost-benefits.

- ***Deploying enough U.S. combat air power -- and intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (IS&R) – assets to back up the Afghan forces for at least several years.*** Air power was critical in avoiding tactical defeats when ISAF and U.S. troops were still present. For all of the tragedy over the strike on a medical facility in Kunduz, it is still the best way of buying the time the Afghan forces need to become truly combat ready, convincing the Taliban it cannot quickly win, and reducing overall casualties relative to more rounds of fighting in Afghan cities, and a takeover by Islamist extremists.

The tragedy in Kunduz is a warning that doing too little too late with inexperienced forces in the middle of a major firefight is not the answer. It may take a mixture of U.S. UCAVs, fixed wing combat aircraft, and rotary wing aircraft to provide both rapidly deployable combat air power and help move Afghan forces in a real emergency. And, it will be better to focus on initial over-deployment rather than ration out too little.

- ***Committing the right amount of aid.*** There is no magic number for the amount of U.S. military and civil aid that will be needed each year in the future, but it is clear that aid will probably be vital through at least 2020, and that the amount should be based on some kind of annual plan worked out with the Afghans, and not simply assigned on the basis of past plans and commitments or arbitrary budget caps.

There is a clear need for the Executive Branch to do a far better job of giving the Congress integrated civil military plans, clear rationales for its aid requests, and showing it has adequate ways of controlling the flow of money and measures of effectiveness. Fifteen years of war have led to far too little progress in all these areas, and it is time that the United States stopped focusing on Afghan corruption alone and actually held itself accountable.

This does not mean that the United States should give the Afghan government a blank check or fail to set conditions for these efforts. It should be clear to everyone in Afghanistan – especially its leaders – that the reforms they once pledged at Tokyo, suitable counter-corruption measures, and basic reforms in the way the Ministries of Defense and Interior operate – will actually take place. The United States should never tolerate another Karzai, or failure to reach an agreement on political leadership.

There also is a clear need for far more honesty and transparency in U.S. reporting on the war. The Congress, the media, and the American people deserve honest reporting on the fighting, the growth of insurgent activity and regional influence, and problems in the Afghan forces and government. So, for that matter, do our allies and the Afghan people. The war cannot be won by “spin” and public relations exercises, and avoiding the truth about the problems in the Afghan government effort or dealing with Pakistan. So far, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) seems the only element of the United States government focused on the real challenges in the war.

For a detailed analysis of the issues and trends in the Afghan war see : **Afghanistan and “Failed State Wars”:
The Need for a Realistic Transition at**

http://csis.org/files/publication/150929_Cordesman_Afghanistan_Failed_State_Wars_1.pdf .

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