

Sustaining the International Commitment in Afghanistan

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The launch of U.S. President Barack Obama's new strategy on Afghanistan, dubbed by some as the 'Afghan Surge', was meant to demonstrate America's long-term commitment in both word and deed and silence many critics who questioned his commitment, after recent references to an 'exit strategy'.

According to sceptics in Afghanistan and beyond, America will eventually abandon Afghanistan as it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 due to short-term interest span and growing economic difficulties at home. Furthermore, Pakistan will continue to reach more 'accommodations' with its home-grown Taliban, other regional players like Iran will pursue their own agendas, and Europeans will be less willing to risk any additional capital in what they see as a hopeless cause. For sceptics, the bottom line is Afghanistan is broken – and you cannot fix it.

This underscores the fundamental need for a collective and concerted public awareness effort in the U.S. and European and other nations involved to promote the cause of a stable Afghanistan. A real and compelling case must be made to influence public opinion and build and sustain popular support, particularly at the grassroots level in Europe, where serious doubts persist. The media must objectively and effectively communicate the personal dimension of the conflict and highlight the humanitarian challenges facing ordinary Afghans. Conveying individual interest stories can generate public interest and humanise the situation beyond the daily reports of fatalities and suicide bombings and the technicalities of military strategy and tactics.

Just as President Obama uses his effective campaign tactics to remind Americans of his full engagement in addressing the economic crisis, he must do the same to promote U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. In other words, his rhetorical commitment to improving the economy on the domestic front must be matched by a firm long-term rhetorical com-

mitment to Afghanistan on the foreign policy front.

An effective comprehensive plan for Afghanistan has been put in place with bipartisan support and the president has made Afghanistan his principal foreign policy priority. It must be given necessary long-term economic, diplomatic, political and military support. This is an issue that goes beyond the partisan divide and requires unanimous backing at all levels.

Europe's Response and Effective Aid

Any potential European contribution is marked by limited public support and the political leadership needed to galvanise it with limited military resources. In addition, the current global economic turmoil forces politicians to focus more on needs at home and less on these abroad, particularly as elections loom in countries like Germany, which further complicate the scenario.

What is required is an honest assessment of European resources and limitations, both materially and politically, and the ability to work as efficiently as possible within those limits while seeking to expand them over time. Many European countries possess specific military and security expertise in areas Afghanistan is in dire need of.

Effective military training must be a principal priority for the police force particularly since endemic corruption plagues this institution,

which has the most direct contact with ordinary Afghans on a daily basis. Failure to improve the police force will only increase public disillusion and the perception that Afghan government authority is corrupt, which can only undermine its long-term existence.

European countries unable to contribute militarily must play a greater role in increasing resources to civilian reconstruction, such as technical expertise and transparent financial aid to provide salaries for Afghan public servants. The Scandinavian countries and the Persian Gulf states of the Gulf Cooperation Council can play an increasingly important role in this sphere as well. Afghan government workers are often underpaid and the best are recruited by international agencies. This prevents the Afghan government from hiring top talent, thereby increasing dependence on the international community and undermining its long-term credibility and efficiency.

The New 'Surge' and Anti-government Outreach

The reality is there are no particularly novel concepts in the President's new Afghanistan strategy since it is a merger of different plans. Indeed, much of the groundwork was laid by the Bush Administration. Many of the recommendations have had support in policy and military circles for quite some time. However, like any new president or administration, it is extremely important for Mr. Obama to identify with an approach in a single document, particularly for a fundamental issue like Afghanistan.

Similar to the surge in Iraq, an immediate objective of the new approach in Afghanistan is to buy time and allow for other essential components to develop efficiently, such as training more Afghan forces and holding more ground to provide the necessary security and basic services that will allow for greater implementation of civilian reconstruction efforts.

It is quite obvious that there is no purely military solution to the conflict and in the long-term there must be a political solution, but effective military means and results will play an important role in influencing the appropriate terms and conditions of any final settlement. The prevalent perception of a weak Afghan government does not incite many anti-government forces to participate in the political process. Furthermore, many insurgents who favour dialogue and the political process may be unwilling to take the risk due to fear of retribution and being targeted by ideologically committed Taliban as traitors. This further underscores the fundamental need for strengthening the Afghan military.

In recent months, the idea of reaching out to 'moderate' or 'soft' Taliban figures has gained more currency. Figures given by some administration officials estimate this group to constitute nearly 70 per cent of anti-government forces. The reality is that many were never Taliban to begin with, but opposed to the Karzai government for

various reasons, leading to alliances of convenience with the Taliban. Understanding their grievances, concerns and needs is critical to incorporating them in any dialogue and reaching a political solution. Furthermore, the considerable influence of criminal elements, involved in the drug trade and beyond, in fuelling anti-government violence is often underestimated.

Finally, the ethno-sectarian element continues to play a considerable role. As is commonly known, the Taliban leadership is primarily Pashto. During its reign of terror from 1996 to 2001, many other Pashto cooperated or collaborated with the Taliban government out of convenience or simple survival. After the American invasion many attempted to reach out but were rejected as collaborators or Taliban. The fact that the Northern Alliance, composed primarily of non-Pashto, played the leading role in the new government in late 2001 further strengthened this tendency. America's initial over-reliance on the Northern Alliance in the short-term may have contributed to counter-productive long-term repercussions, including sectarian resentment and grievances. Feeling disenfranchised and excluded from the political process, many decided to pick up arms against the Karzai government. Broad parallels may be drawn to the policy of de-Baathification which excluded many from the political process in Iraq who then decided to join insurgent forces.

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Including many, but not all, of these disenfranchised elements in the political process remains crucial to the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the region. Grasping and addressing the cultural and political nuances, in addition to the broader diplomatic and economic dynamics at

play is equally essential. The inter-connectivity of all these factors must not be underestimated or simplified and cannot be addressed separately. Doing so will result in failure with disastrous consequences for global order and stability.

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