

NOVEMBER 20-22, 2009

A FUNDAMENTALLY FLAWED AFGHAN POLICY

— James Kunder

The Transatlantic Taskforce on Development, chaired by Gunilla Carlsson and Jim Kolbe, has rightly emphasized that 21st century development thinking must take into account “conflict-prone, post-conflict, and crime-ridden states.” These states tend to remain poor, fail to harness development investments, and prevent or reverse development in neighboring countries. Nowhere are these dynamics more profound than in Afghanistan, the subject of a German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)-sponsored transatlantic seminar held in Paris last April.

The Obama administration is engaged in a fundamental reassessment of U.S. actions in Afghanistan, both military and developmental. One can only wish the new administration success in its undertaking, but I fear that by not sufficiently linking development and stability operations in Afghanistan, U.S. President Barack Obama and his team may make exactly the same mistake that his predecessor did by misreading Afghan realities. Forget all the specific policy debates about overly aggressive bombing, about anti-poppy tactics, about cross-border raids from Pakistan, about Hamid Karzai’s performance, and about troop levels. These are important, but the fundamental flaw in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan goes much deeper, and has carried over seamlessly from the Bush administration to the Obama administration: the United States continues to evaluate everything in that tortured Asian nation through an anti-Taliban, counterinsurgency lens that is hopelessly distorting the on-the-ground reality.

What I mean is this: After doing its dead-level best for a decade to ignore Afghanistan once the Soviets were driven out, America’s stunning reunion with this isolated and brutally poor land

came, of course, through the 9/11 bombings, the planning for which occurred in Afghanistan. The meteoric rise in awareness about Afghanistan after 9/11—certainly most Americans would not have been able to find it on a map before then—made an indelible, but highly skewed, impression on the American body politic. Afghanistan became—for most Americans, and certainly for the offensive-minded Bush administration—primarily the place where the Taliban were protecting Osama bin Laden. Based on that insight, we began, in the fall of 2001, a military (and to a lesser extent diplomatic and development) mission to defeat the Taliban and install a Western-oriented government in Kabul. There is currently a widely perceived notion that the Taliban are “resurgent” and that we are “losing the fight.” The protracted debate at the White House over allied troop levels is driven by these perceptions.

Not a zero sum game

Unfortunately, the complex reality of multi-ethnic, tribal, desperately poor, irredentist, widely illiterate, feudal, poppy-growing, deeply religious, water-hungry Afghanistan, with its traditional, highly decentralized form of governance, was set aside in our shocking reunion with Afghanistan in 2001 and in our frenzy to “defeat” the enemy Taliban. Based on my observations in dozens of National Security Council meetings on Afghanistan, the complex Afghan dynamics, although recognized, were internalized by U.S. policymakers as subsets of job number one: destroying the Taliban.

Certainly, in the wake of the New York and Pentagon bombings, the United States had a right to identify and punish those responsible for killing its citizens, extending even to regime change in

Kabul. But maintaining for seven years the linear, zero-sum game analytical construct that what is happening in Afghanistan is somehow, essentially, between us and the Taliban—the logic that sustained two terms of the Bush administration, and is now being used by the Obama administration to justify massive troop increases—is fundamentally flawed. Sustaining that mindset is likely to set the United States up for profound failure in Afghanistan.

Most of the American and allied patrols that are being attacked in isolated rural valleys and on the plains of Afghanistan have little, if anything, to do with any “Taliban resurgence,” if by that phrase we mean a rejuvenation of Mullah Omar and his band of cronies who controlled Kabul until the autumn of 2001. As a careful reading of press reports indicates, most of the attacks have to do with one of several factors: desire for revenge over a family or clan member who has been killed previously; fear that foreign troops will upset local political, economic, trade, or other arrangements; or, simply, the same reason that almost any foreign troops maneuvering through any isolated valley in heavily armed Afghanistan any time in the past five hundred years would have been attacked—the villagers are profoundly suspicious that these troops will trample deeply held religious and cultural traditions.

Layer on top of these realities the fact that many of those doing the shooting have never been out of their immediate vicinity, cannot read, and are desperately poor, and you have a formula for continued heavy casualties on all sides, Taliban or no Taliban.

Afghanistan is not Iraq

When I read of American commanders seeking to have Afghan government control “re-established” in southern Afghanistan after they have wrested the turf from the Taliban occupiers—in an Afghan version of the “seize, hold, build” tactics developed in Iraq—I respect the difficult, bloody work that allied troops have accomplished, but wonder whether they have really grasped the historical and current realities with which they are dealing. The level of Kabul’s influence in southern areas like Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces is similar to what it has been for much of the past five centuries, and no level of enhanced American troop deployments, or more American development aid officers, is going to change that reality without sustained investment over many decades.

Unlike Iraq, a land that has known highly centralized government for millennia, and where chaos in the wake of the invasion could

be resolved, in part, by restoring central and provincial control, many regions of Afghanistan have never known what we in the West would consider “government” or “government services.” There is, in fact, nothing to “restore.”

In short, while Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan contain their share of dangerous, anti-Western fanatics who require a military response, the core “enemy” to be “defeated” is no discrete group called the Taliban. The enemy in Afghanistan is, and always was, profound poverty and isolation, the resolution of which does not fit into the neat one- or two-year timetables of White House and military planners. My former colleagues at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and our partners at the U.S. State Department, attempted to impart this perspective during the past seven years as military expenditures, every year, far exceeded investments in Afghan reconstruction. It is perhaps understandable that the Bush administration, scarred by living through 9/11 and disposed toward military solutions, overrode the long-term reconstruction paradigm. What is more surprising is that the Obama administration appears to be continuing to operate according to the anti-Taliban, zero-sum game framework as well, even dramatically increasing troop levels.

No unified enemy

This paper is not an argument for hopelessness. Quite the contrary, the Afghans have shown amazing resilience and progress for a people suffering almost unimaginable hardship for the last three decades. As Afghan President Hamid Karzai rightly reports, much has been accomplished in Afghanistan in the past seven years, and much more progress is possible.

Rather, this paper argues for a dose of realism. There really is no unified, single enemy force, nor even a loose collection of enemy insurgents, the defeat of which will bring “victory” in Afghanistan. The “clear-hold-build” lessons of Iraq, no matter how skillfully adapted by General Petraeus, General McChrystal, and their colleagues, are only marginally applicable in a nation like Afghanistan with virtually no available skilled governance capacity to deploy to the cleared and held areas.

There are really only two options for the West in Afghanistan, whether we want to accept them or not. Option one is to put aside any real hope of a modern, progressive, reasonably prosperous Afghanistan because one cannot possibly be constructed in the one- to two-year timeframe

military planners are suggesting, even if Western troops kill everyone who has ever called himself a Talib. In this option, the West can probably train and equip enough Afghan army troops to keep Afghanistan's borders reasonably secure, and prevent any major armed elements from seriously challenging the government or establishing a full-blown state-within-a-state from which to launch terrorist attacks abroad, at least in the short-term. Of course, Afghan women will still feel pressure to wear burqas, Afghan children will continue to die of preventable diseases in appalling numbers, the mountain valleys will remain illiterate and isolated, and there is a high likelihood that our own children will face renewed instability emanating from Afghanistan in their lifetimes.

Option two is to face squarely the reality that our soldiers are being fired upon because of isolation, illiteracy, economic deprivation, and feudal arrangements in the countryside, of which the Taliban are but an epiphenomenon. In order to counteract terrorism and instability in the long-term, if we really want a modern Afghan nation-state, with jobs, schooling, public services, and opportunity for the impoverished, we require a long-term architecture.

The international community will have to recognize that "winning" in Afghanistan means taking on a multi-year, expensive reconstruction and development strategy that will put Afghanistan on the path to modernity. Option two requires us to put aside the current conflict logic in which "defeating" insurgents takes center stage. Instead, it requires us to mobilize the American and international resources required to win the real battle in Afghanistan.

James Kunder is a senior resident fellow of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

