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Coming to terms with the Taliban-dominated insurgency

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34

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Security in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly since 2006 as a previously marginal Taliban-dominated insurgency engulfed much of the south and east of the country, and spread aggressively into areas that were once considered safe. Monthly casualty figures for Western military forces in Afghanistan now rival those in Iraq, although there are far fewer troops there.[1] Widely published analysis from the draft US National Intelligence Estimate that was leaked to the media in October 2008, paints a gloomy picture of an expanding insurgency and a failure of governance in Afghanistan. The consensus report by sixteen American intelligence agencies concluded that Afghanistan was in a downward spiral accelerated by endemic government corruption and increasingly sophisticated attacks launched by militants operating from safe havens in neighbouring Pakistan.[2] These findings echo the testimony before Congress by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, who stated that the current strategy in Afghanistan is not working. Instead, he stressed, the United States urgently needs to improve its nation building efforts and adopt an overarching strategy to address the cross-border nature of the insurgency. The situation facing Afghanistan is so grave that US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, has recently indicated that five extra US combat brigades will deploy to Afghanistan from January 2009. This 'surge' of up to 30,000 troops is to provide a secure environment for the September/October 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections in Afghanistan.

A surge solution and reconciliation with the Taliban?

A resurgent Taliban and rising levels of violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan caused the insurgency to become a leading foreign policy issue in the US presidential campaign. President-elect Barack Obama repeatedly said he wants to give Afghanistan a higher priority with more forces, as US troops are incrementally withdrawn from Iraq. The reduction of US personnel and the gradual transfer of responsibility for security in Iraq to local forces was made possible by the success of the so-called surge strategy in containing insurgent violence.

The troop surge of an additional 30,000 US combat personnel stabilised the politico-military situation and brought Iraq back from the brink of state failure. Sectarian groups re-evaluated their allegiances after realising the Americans were not about to commence a unilateral withdrawal from Iraq. Indeed, the United States has just negotiated a security pact with the Iraqi Government that will keep a residual US force in the country for another

three years.[3] A feature of the surge was to encourage factional leaders to stop fighting the authorities and instead join the political process. The minority Sunni population in particular was induced to turn on foreign jihadists through the Awakening Councils and Sons of Iraq movement.

Obama's election win coincides with the appointment as head of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) of the principal architect of the surge, General David Petraeus, who is now also responsible for US military operations in Afghanistan. Petraeus is currently undertaking a wholesale review of the mission in Afghanistan and there is much speculation he may bring a surge-type solution to bear in the conflict. Petraeus has certainly made it clear the United States is open to negotiation with 'reconcilable' Taliban commanders, and ready to allow them to enter the political mainstream if they break with the insurgency. Reconciliation marks a major policy reversal for the Americans, who decried earlier British attempts to divide the Taliban in Helmand Province, which is at the seat of the insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, has gone one step further, indicating his desire to deal directly with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. However, Karzai's earlier overtures to insurgent groups including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's notorious Hizb-i-Islami militia have met with little success. Moreover, Mullah Omar is unlikely to eschew his long-standing relationship with al-Qaeda—an anathema for the Americans—despite reports of a growing rift between the terrorist network and the Afghan Taliban. Karzai's aim in engaging in Saudi-sponsored talks between the Afghan Government and figures associated with the erstwhile Taliban regime appears to be to achieve a ceasefire or enlist the support of at least some insurgent elements prior to the elections in 2009. But if Karzai does negotiate with Mullah Omar, he does so from a position of increasing weakness.

What is required according to the UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan and head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Ambassador Kai Eide, is a 'political surge' to arrest the slide into state failure and to boost institutional capacity in order to deliver economic development, reconstruction and essential public goods including security and justice. By providing enough security forces to stabilise the country, the UN-mandated North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) can help to build the legitimacy of the national government and thereby offer disaffected Afghans an alternative to the Taliban's radical Islamist agenda.

Know thy enemy

As noted earlier, a key element of Petraeus' strategy is likely to involve exploring the chances of reconciliation with so-called 'moderate' members of the insurgency; political opponents (including violent actors) that represent a genuine constituency who were excluded from the post-Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan. This involves attempting to exploit cleavages between pragmatists and hardliners in the Taliban-dominated insurgency, which is far from a homogenous entity implied by the rhetoric of the War on Terror.[4] Instead it is a consortium of ideologically-allied Sunni extremist militant groups with different motivations that operate along two fronts in the Pushtun tribal belt of the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands. The insurgency now appears to have split between a hierarchical Taliban organisation under Mullah Omar in the south, and a network of loosely coordinated groups in the east that function as a 'complex adaptive system'[5] mainly comprising the Pakistani Taliban, Haqqani Network and Hizb-i-Islami; all with close ties to al-Qaeda.

The insurgency is essentially being conducted by violent Pushtun Islamists on either side of the 2,430 km frontier that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan. The border between these states, known as the Durand Line[6], is an inhospitable region of high mountain ranges to the north and desert plains in the south. Many thousands of people traverse this region daily at a small number of established border posts, and hundreds of unmanned crossing points.

Out of all the various ethnicities that inhabit the border region, only the Pushtuns have been susceptible to the type of jihad being waged by the Taliban. It is argued the Pushtun people are prone to religious extremism and are hostile to attempts at external governance due to features inherent in their tribal culture.[7] The Pushtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and have dominated the country for 250 years. The vast majority of the estimated 42 million Pushtuns throughout the region are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi religious tradition. There are 350 Pushtun tribes that are divided into two major classifications—Ghilzais and Durranis—together with a number of smaller groupings including Sarbanis, Ghurghust and Karlanris. Each tribe has a large number of *khels* (clans) descending from it that are in turn divided into *kahols* (extended family groups).[8]

US authorities must negotiate a complex cultural landscape in any proposed attempts at reconciliation with militarised Pushtuns. Tribal militias in Afghanistan that accept the post-Taliban constitution should be given legitimate authority in the same manner as the Sunni tribes in Iraq, particularly in areas where Coalition forces have little access. However, this task is complicated by the insurgency that has subverted traditional Pushtun tribal structures. In much of the tribal belt radical Islamist Mullahs have now become empowered at the expense of traditional tribal leaders.

The dangerous south

The Afghan Taliban are the largest insurgent group in Afghanistan. Their leaders are motivated by an extremist Sunni Islamist ideology. They wish to overthrow the Western-backed Karzai government and replace it with a theocratic regime based on a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam derived from Deobandism: a conservative Islamic orthodoxy that seeks to emulate the life of the Prophet Mohammed. The creed of Deobandism arose from the Darul Uloom Madrassah (Quranic school) in Deoband, India, and was propagated in the Pushtun tribal belt through madrassahs run by Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam political party, where many of the Taliban leaders were educated. Adherents to Deobandism believe they have a sacred duty to wage jihad in the defence of Islam.[9] In addition to religion, cultural mores that predate Islam also shape insurgent behaviour.

Large numbers of Afghan Taliban escaped across the border into Pakistan with the active support of its military authorities following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Mullah Omar arrived in Quetta, Baluchistan, in 2002 after evading capture by US Special Operations Forces and their Northern Alliance allies. He quickly set about organising opposition to the new Western-backed Afghan Government. Mullah Omar appointed an inner *shura* (council) that is divided into a number of functional committees dealing with military, propaganda, economic, political and religious affairs.[10] From this shura stem local Taliban military commands.

Pakistan's refusal to dismantle the Taliban higher command and control (C2) in Quetta poses the most serious threat to the ISAF effort in southern Afghanistan. The greatest number of kinetic events occurs in ISAF's Regional Command South that borders Baluchistan. The Taliban employ a wide range of tactics against Coalition and Afghan national security forces ranging from battalion-sized ground assaults to asymmetric warfare.[11] They are an agile foe that changed tactics after realising the futility of engaging superior conventional military forces that are well-supported by air assets. Large-scale clashes in the field in 2006–07 have given way to a combination of ambush-type attacks and the widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings.[12]

The overall Taliban strategy appears to rely less on controlling territory than expanding its influence. The Taliban are fighting a war of political attrition to outlast war-weary Coalition forces. This causes Afghans to reassess their loyalty and support to the government in Kabul: the main centre of gravity for the Coalition within Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the Taliban are waging a sophisticated war in the information battlespace in order to influence public opinion in the West: the main centre of gravity outside Afghanistan. This poses a dilemma for ISAF that is forced to employ an economy of force approach which substitutes manpower with firepower. The extensive use of air power has been damaging to counter-insurgency efforts among a revenge-oriented people with little tolerance for 'collateral damage'.

Every stray bomb that kills innocent civilians loses support for the Afghan Government and creates new enemies for the Coalition. However, a more ground-centric approach will inevitably result in greater Coalition casualties that will reduce support for the war among casualty-averse Western polities.

Narcotics are a conflict resource which provides the Taliban with substantial funds to launch their summer offensives. Drug money from Afghanistan's bumper opium poppy harvests has allowed the Taliban to pay and arm fighters, and to compensate the families of suicide bombers. In the 1990s the Taliban government collected *usher* from opium farmers; an Islamic agricultural tax ranging from 10% to 20% of production.[13] Poppy cultivation is now closely correlated with Afghanistan's insecure southern and eastern provinces where insurgent activity is most pronounced. However, the Taliban's funding is not entirely sourced from the drug trade, but also from *zakat* (alms) collected at mosques in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider Islamic world, donations from wealthy Arab backers, and through other criminal activity including kidnapping, robbery and extortion.[14]

The Afghan Taliban continue to be regarded by the Pakistani military as a natural ally to counter growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and prevent residual Pushtun irredentism focused on an independent 'Pushtunistan' that threatens Pakistan's national cohesion. Pakistan nurtured the Taliban as proxy fighters in the 1990s, and they still represent its best means of retaining influence in Afghanistan. Islamabad views Afghanistan through the prism of its adversarial relations with India. It is apprehensive at the close relations between New Delhi and the Karzai government, and points to a proliferation of Indian consulates in Afghanistan. India is accused of using these facilities to assist the Baluchistan Liberation Army and Sindhi groups conducting separatist insurgencies in Pakistan.

The Afghanistan–Pakistan insurgency clearly requires a regional solution which gives Islamabad a reason to back down from its objective of achieving 'strategic depth' vis-a-vis India by intervening in Afghanistan and Indian-administered Kashmir. Afghanistan's other neighbours that include the Central Asian republics, Iran and China, together with Russia, must also be drawn into the process. All of these countries have legitimate interests in Afghanistan and are affected by war diffusion from that state which threatens their internal stability. The whole region is also overlain by narcotics trafficking routes that emanate outwards from Afghanistan leading to enormous problems of criminality and drug addiction.

The eastern front

The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan precipitated an influx of Islamist militants into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)[15] that would eventually result in the Talibanisation of the entire region, and a systemic insurgency in Pakistan. Following their consolidation in South Waziristan during 2002, the emergent Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda have progressively occupied one tribal agency after another. The FATA has effectively become the 'terrorism central' that Operation Enduring Freedom was supposed to shut down in Afghanistan. It is a secure base for C2, recruiting, training, fundraising and the launching and recovery of operations.

The insurgency in the FATA has a multi-layered and overlapping structure. At its base are Pakistani Pushtun tribesmen who are now Taliban in their own right. Above them are the Afghan Taliban who fled to the FATA after the fall of their regime, followed by Arabs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Chechens, Kazakhs, Uighurs and Kashmiri militants from groups such as the Laskar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.[16]

The Pakistani Pushtuns' assistance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda is partially explained by their unique tribal code known as *Pushtunwali* (way of the Pushtun). Nevertheless, the Taliban and its associated groups have also engaged in a systematic campaign of intimidation and murder of hundreds of tribal leaders to entrench their position in the FATA.[17]

The signal failure of Islamabad's efforts to mitigate the insurgent presence in the FATA has allowed the Taliban to expand their influence into Afghanistan and within Pakistan. The militancy was encouraged by General Pervez Musharraf's flawed policy of signing peace deals with so-called 'tribal representatives', which amounted to little more than capitulation by the Pakistani military. Pakistan's failed policies in the FATA did not prevent the insurgents from staging attacks in Afghanistan and have instead offset Coalition gains in eastern Afghanistan.

The agenda of Pakistani Taliban leaders such as Baitullah Mehsud of the Tehreek-e-Taliban (movement for the Taliban) umbrella oganisation is the establishment of a Sharia state. Their long-term aim is to Talibanise the whole of Pakistan, but in the short term they want to expand their base of operations across the North West Frontier Province. They have been supported in this venture by al-Qaeda that has shifted its focus from Afghanistan to Pakistan, where it saw an opportunity to destabilise a major South Asian state that is a US ally in the War on Terror and a leader in the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda now appears to be giving ideological guidance and strategic direction to the Pakistani Taliban, but does not exercise control over these armed groups. The terror network serves as a 'force multiplier' for the insurgency, with its experienced operatives providing technical expertise and coordinating attacks.

The other two organisations that constitute the 'terror triangle' in ISAF's Regional Command East, along with the Taliban, are the Haqqani Network and the Hizb-i-Islami. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a veteran Mujahideen fighter and minister for tribal affairs in the Taliban government, was instrumental in organising the insurgency in eastern Afghanistan. Together with his son, Sirajuddin, Haqqani runs a network of radical madrassahs around Miranshah, North Waziristan. He has survived several US missile strikes, and was implicated in the July 2008 Indian embassy bombing in Kabul.

The Hizb-i-Islami, founded in 1975, was one of the 'Peshawar seven' Pushtun political parties that received the bulk of US funds directed through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate during the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s. Its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was responsible for much of the internecine warfare between rival Mujahideen groups in the 1990s that left Kabul in ruins. After a period of exile in Iran, Hekmatyar established a base outside Peshawar in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and threw his support behind the Taliban in 2001. Hizb-i-Islami insurgent activity is centred on eastern Afghan provinces that border the FATA.[18]

The Coalition must develop a viable strategy that deals with the difficult problem of safe havens in Pakistan. Cross-border operations are a limited tool that targets the militant's C2 and attempts to ramp up domestic pressure on Pakistani authorities to do more to disrupt insurgent activity in the FATA. Ultimately, Pakistan must be made aware that the only solution to its own jihadist insurgency is to relinquish support to the Afghan Taliban, and to dismantle the Haqqani Network and the Hizb-i-Islami, both of which are al-Qaeda allies.

Conclusion

Historically, expectations that the next war (or the concurrent conflict in the case of Afghanistan) will resemble the last one have seldom transpired. While effective in reducing levels of violence in Iraq, a surge strategy may not necessarily succeed over the short-term in Afghanistan. Western militaries in Afghanistan are at maximum exploitation and additional forces are unlikely to arrive fast enough or in sufficient numbers to reverse the decline in security prior to the elections in 2009. Nor are enough indigenous security forces being trained to secure the ungoverned spaces of Afghanistan that are being adroitly exploited by insurgents. In any case, reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan is not currently possible. Insurgents think they are in the ascendency and have little incentive to talk to Karzai or the Americans: Pushtuns traditionally do not negotiate from a position of relative strength or when they appear to be winning. Reconciliation talks will be more about separating moderate factions from hardliners, rather than doing a comprehensive peace deal with the Taliban. In the meantime the Coalition must continue to exert pressure on the insurgents to create more pliable interlocutors for an eventual political settlement. Clearly serious about its commitment in Afghanistan but constrained in its military capacity, the United States will invariably call on its NATO allies and partner states, including Australia, to provide additional resources to secure a positive outcome for the ISAF armed state-building mission. With the adoption of a surge approach, a new Obama Presidency, Afghan elections, and important decisions to be made by Canada and the Netherlands about their continuing deployments alongside the Australian Defence Force, 2009 may well prove to be the pivotal year for the war in Afghanistan and particularly challenging for the Australian Government.

Endnotes

[1] There are approximately 78,000 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and non-ISAF US troops in Afghanistan, compared with 152,000 personnel in the US-led Multi-National Force–Iraq.
[2] 'US Study is Said to Warn of a Crisis in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 8 October 2008.
[3] 'Iraqi Cabinet Backs Military Pact', *The Australian*, 17 November 2008.
[4] Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, 'From Great Game to Grand Bargain', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6, 2008, p 32.
[5] At its most basic, a complex adaptive system is a resilient collection of multiple, inter-connected agents that have the capacity to change and learn from experience. Control of such a system is highly decentralised and dispersed among the agents, which constantly act and react to what other agents are doing.
[6] In 1893 Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary of India, delineated Afghanistan's boundary with the state that is now Pakistan, in order to create a buffer between Imperial Russia and British India. The Durand Line had the effect of dividing the Pushtun nation.
[7] See Thomas H Johnson and M Chris Mason, 'No Sign Until the First Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan Afghanistan Frontier', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2008.
[8] ibid., p 51.
[9] ibid., pp 27-28.
[10] Seth G Jones, 'The Rise of Afghanistan's Insurgency: State Failure and Jihad', *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2008, p 31.
[11] Cyrus Hodes and Mark Sedra, *The Search for Security in Post-Taliban Afghanistan,* Adelphi Paper No. 341, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, 2007, p 27.

[12] See Anthony Cordesman, *Losing the Afghan-Pakistan War? The Rising Threat,* available at <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080917_afghanthreat.pdf>
[13] Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos,* Allen Lane, London, 2008, pp 329-330.
[14] Jones, op cit., p 14.
[15] The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is a 27,220 km^2 ethnic Pushtun region that is nominally controlled by the Pakistan Government. It is strategically located between the Pakistan–Afghanistan border and the settled areas of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. The FATA comprise seven Agencies: Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan, together with six Frontier Regions (FR): FR Bannu, FR Dera Ismail Khan, FR Kohat, FR Lakki, FR Peshawar, and FR Tank. Directly inherited from the British Raj, the FATA retained its semi-autonomous status when Pakistan became independent in 1947. Each Agency or Region is administered by a Political Agent or District Coordination Officer directly appointed by the government in Islamabad.
[16] Rashid, op cit., p 265.
[17] Johnson and Mason, op cit., pp 58-59.
[18] Hodes and Sedra, op cit., p 30.

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