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A Long Hot Summer: Crisis and Opportunity in Afghanistan

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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

A looming Spring offensive by the Taliban seriously threatens the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan and international efforts to defeat al-Qaeda.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The international community, including Australia, should signal a united, long-term commitment to support the Afghan government's efforts to secure and rebuild the country, in contrast to the fitful and sporadic engagement of recent years.

The Coalition in Afghanistan should adopt a more aggressive posture toward Taliban forces. In particular, the restrictive rules of engagement operated under by some NATO countries in Afghanistan should be revised.

The Taliban leadership and sanctuaries in Pakistan will also need to be targeted, including through increased and sustained international pressure on the government of Pakistan to arrest key Taliban leaders and officials.

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On 21 March each year, the people of Afghanistan celebrate the Spring festival of Nawruz. Families gather to mark the onset of the new season, and to wish each other well for the coming year. Yet this year, Nawruz is overshadowed by a gathering sense of apprehension.[1] All the available evidence suggests that the opponents of the Karzai government and of its Coalition supporters are positioning themselves for their fiercest attacks ever.[2] As the snow melts and ground becomes passable again, hundreds of foreign fighters are poised to strike against both the instrumentalities and symbols of the state, and the large proportion of the Afghan population that remains committed to the transition inaugurated by the Bonn Agreement of December 2001.[3] This is not, however, a threat just to the security of Afghanistan. In a very real sense, it reflects a recrudescence of the al-Qaeda network and its affiliates, and thus challenges those countries and peoples who have fallen victim to al-Qaeda's brand of globalised terrorism. Afghanistan is the front line in confronting these forces, and if the wider world allows the struggle for Afghanistan to be lost, it could pay a heavy price.

The threat of a Spring offensive

In late 2005, following the formal completion of the Bonn process, which embraced the establishment of a new administration, the drafting of a new constitution, and the holding of successful presidential and parliamentary elections, the United States and its major partners in the international community trumpeted Afghanistan as the success story in the 'Global War on Terror'. The United States sought to reduce its military presence and to transfer authority for all of Afghanistan to NATO and the Bonn-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Moreover, the United States initiated discussions with Afghan officials aimed at reducing the US-funded Afghan National Army from its originally-planned size of 70,000 to around 48,000-55,000, citing cost and a reduced threat to security.

Such optimism about Afghanistan's security situation was misplaced. In early 2006, Afghanistan faced multiple challenges, including burgeoning narcotics production, terrorism, an ongoing insurgency, weak institutions at the provincial and district levels, and the absence of a coherent strategy for dealing with these issues. The forces of the Afghan National Army remained too small and ill equipped to provide a security umbrella sufficiently robust to counter these challenges. Badly paid, poorly equipped, and inadequately trained police forces were unable to carry out basic law-and-order tasks, or withstand the onslaught of terrorists and insurgents armed with sophisticated weapons. As the year progressed, bolstered by external and internal factors, the insurgency intensified, with the number of suicide attacks more than tripling over the previous year to 142, Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks more than doubling to 1,745, and the number of combat-related fatalities rising to over 4,000. This made 2006 the bloodiest year since the Taliban were ousted in 2001.[4]

During 2006, NATO improved its conventional capabilities and, along with the International Coalition Forces, won every tactical engagement it undertook. This does not necessarily ensure, however, that strategic

victory in Afghanistan is within reach. Victory requires more resources, greater levels of commitment from the Afghan government and its international partners, and a re-assessment of tactics. Despite the often lopsided tactical victories of NATO and the Coalition, the threat to Afghan stability and security has not diminished: indeed, if anything it has increased, especially in the areas bordering Pakistan in the south and east of Afghanistan. The Taliban and their associates are being fed by a steady supply of recruits from long-established networks in Pakistan and from elements within Afghanistan.[5] Without a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan's security problems involving robust action on both sides of the border with Pakistan — the 'end state' of a democratic and sustainable Afghanistan as defined by the Afghan government and its international partners will not be achievable.

A closer examination of the nature of previous engagements between insurgents and international forces in southern Afghanistan reveals this dilemma, with implications for this year's looming Spring offensive. The strategic objective for the Taliban and their collaborators remains unchanged: the creation of an extremist Islamic state in Afghanistan, and the expulsion of foreign non-Muslim forces. It is primarily this idea that provides motivation and some cohesion for the new generation of insurgents. However, in tactical terms, the insurgents have proved themselves adept at adjusting to changing circumstances and exploiting weaknesses within the Coalition or the Afghan Government. By creating instability, denying Kabul control over the countryside, implementing targeted assassinations of the pro-government clergy, randomly assassinating Afghan Government officials, and launching suicide strikes at public gatherings, the insurgents have sought to delegitimise the Afghan Government and intimidate a beleaguered population.

The insurgents learned quickly in 2006 that their ill-trained foot soldiers, some of them mercenaries, were no match for NATO's superior firepower; thus insurgents abandoned their aim of seizing Kandahar and other territory elsewhere in southern Afghanistan. Instead, the insurgents repeatedly returned, with smaller forces, to areas with minimal Afghan Government administrative or security presence soon after those areas were cleared by NATO and Afghan Forces. The Taliban counted on the fact that the international forces would rely heavily on air power to respond to such incursions. This would cause collateral damage no matter how much caution the international forces displayed, offsetting any tactical gains such air strikes achieved. While Afghans may have had a high threshold for civilian casualties in the initial years of the 'Global War on Terror', they have become increasingly impatient with such tactics and question the sustainability of the entire approach. Kabul has repeatedly called on its international partners not only to attack insurgents in Afghanistan, but also to move against their command and control structures wherever they may be, and to disrupt their networks, their sources of funding, and their logistics support. Otherwise, international partners risk alienating common Afghans, whose continuing political support should be a key strategic objective of the counterinsurgency campaign.

The Taliban's tactics suggest that whereas in the past there was simply cooperation between

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, now there is something approaching a merger. Prior to the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the Taliban did not have a history of suicide bombings, and they would not allow depiction of human forms. Now they are distributing videos of beheadings with Al-Qaeda's trademark *Al-Sahab* logo. Even more disturbing is a recent statement by Mullah Dadullah, the top Taliban military commander in southern Afghanistan. In an interview with CBS News on 29 December 2006, Dadullah stated that the Taliban would attack Americans in the United States even if United States forces left Afghanistan.

Further complicating matters as the Spring offensive takes shape is the burgeoning narcotics trade. While Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, criminals, and narcotics dealers may have different objectives, they all benefit from instability. It is difficult to discern where the insurgency ends and the drug dealers begin, especially in southern Afghanistan. Thus, any counterinsurgency policy must entail a robust response to combat this narcotics scourge. This requires determined action against drug traffickers (including the entry of their names in international watch-lists) and nuanced approaches to providing alternative livelihoods, rather than crude eradication strategies which simply harm vulnerable farmers and their families. Anti-narcotics efforts should not be dismissed simply as 'mission creep'.

The intensity of Taliban attacks is likely to surge in southern Afghanistan (Kandahar, Helmand, and Uruzgan) in the coming months, with insurgents employing tactics similar to those used in previous years. There is also increasing evidence that the Taliban and their associates will seek to enlarge their area of operation by opening up a second front in eastern Afghanistan, where the gifted Afghan-Australian governor of Paktia, Hakim Taniwal, was killed in a targeted suicide attack in September 2006. Aside from stretching limited United States, NATO and Afghan Government resources, this would be a highly alarming development given the nature of the elements at work. Energised by United States setbacks in Iraq, foreign fighters have been returning to the Afghan-Pakistan border,[6] and they view the conflict in Afghanistan as an appropriate battleground to carry out their extremist endeavours. Further, the border area is in close proximity to the Pakistani district of Waziristan where extremists have *de facto* control. Thus, it could become a magnet for battle-tested foreign extremists to provide training and transfer their technologically advanced knowledge on IEDs and terror tactics to their fellow extremists.

Security and state-building

Kabul is not Baghdad, and the Karzai Government is not at risk of being directly overthrown by the Taliban. But this does not mean that the challenge which the Taliban poses is negligible. Any new government which takes office in a severely disrupted state will be judged in large measure by its ability to deliver security for ordinary people. Security is not simply an abstractly desirable good; it is a prerequisite for the ability of citizens and communities to develop and implement their goals, and obtain for their families some prospect of a better life in the future. If a significant component of the Afghan population continues to feel a pervasive sense of insecurity, the legitimacy of the Afghan

government runs the risk of being seriously compromised. How has this come about? The answer lies in the past, and in particular in the ways in which the United States has chosen to manage its global commitments since 2001, and how the Afghan government has crafted its policy settings in response.

When the Taliban were overthrown, Afghanistan's new rulers were confronted with the dilemma of how to meet popular demands for security when they lacked a proper army or national police force. The best solution in such circumstances was the deployment of a neutral security force, under the umbrella of which a reformed security sector could be constructed, and trust between hostile political actors could be rebuilt. The Bonn Agreement provided for ISAF to perform this role, and, more importantly, to help sustain the positive momentum for change which the agreement in Bonn had created. But the deployment of ISAF beyond Kabul was blocked in early 2002 by the Bush Administration,[7] which wished to conserve essential air assets for a future campaign in Iraq. To obtain a modicum of security in the countryside, President Karzai was thus driven to follow the Coalition in cutting deals not only with legitimate local powerholders but also with a range of unappealing predatory warlords, whose association with the new state has done nothing to boost its standing with ordinary Afghans. As a longer-term way of addressing the provision of security, the United States and its allies supported 'security sector reform' including the establishment of a new Afghan National Army and a new Afghan National Police, and the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combatants (the 'Afghan New Beginnings Program'). While these processes all reflect highly desirable goals, they have faced numerous problems. Establishing armies and police forces is not just a matter of basic training, but of establishing management capacity, as well as a strong ethos of loyalty to civilian authority, and in the case of police, to the idea of the rule of law. Furthermore, modern armies and police are expensive to operate, which raises real questions of long-term sustainability.

This points to a further problem: the Afghan state has been short-changed with respect to material support. In 2006, the Afghan Government estimated that over a five-year period, Afghanistan would require donor assistance of approximately US$4 billion per annum to help meet its basic development and non-development needs. Yet future donor commitments from March 2006 came to only US$10.5 billion, little more than half the sum required.[8] But the problem also lies in the architecture for the delivery of assistance. Between 70 and 80 per cent of funding for 'state-like' activities bypasses the Afghan government and goes instead to international agencies, NGOs or private commercial contractors. This does little to enhance local capacity, and nothing to build the reputation of the Afghan state.

A major Spring offensive by the Taliban will pose a challenge to Afghanistan's state-building project in a number of ways, but it is important to appreciate that the threat is not just military, but political. The immediate political objective of such an assault is to affect the ways in which the Afghan people, the Afghan government and the international community think about their positions and their prospects. If Afghans substantially lose confidence in the Afghan

government, more and more will be tempted simply to sit on the fence, greatly complicating the task of building security. And if the Afghan government splinters in the face of attack, it will be very difficult to ensure a coherent response to the Taliban threat. However, it is the Coalition and NATO, and the voters and political elites in Coalition and NATO countries, that will be the principal targets of a Spring offensive, even if it is mainly Afghan targets that are struck. At the moment international support is holding, although opposition parties in both Italy and Canada have proved restive in recent times.

A Spring offensive producing higher Afghan and Coalition casualties could open the door for very quiet and subtle hints from the Taliban's backers that a 'restructuring' of the Afghan government might lead to a diminution in violence on the ground — in other words, that it might be possible to 'cut a deal' of the sort which the Pakistan Government signed with 'elders' in North Waziristan in September 2006. Any such deal would represent an unmitigated defeat for the entire project of transition on which Afghanistan embarked in 2001. In effect it would concede to Pakistan a veto over who should be permitted to rule in Afghanistan, and in the long run it would be a recipe for the re-igniting of civil strife within Afghanistan itself, as well as for the creation of a safe haven for radical forces

Tasks for the international community

It is vital that the international community adopt a long-term rather than short-term view of the stabilisation and rebuilding effort in Afghanistan. The Taliban have a saying that their opponents may have watches, but they have time. Their focus, and that of their backers, is on the long run, and outsiders ignore this at their peril.

The situation in Afghanistan remains very difficult, but the country is not beyond salvation. The threat of a long, hot Summer poses a major challenge for the international community, but also provides an opportunity to rectify earlier mistakes. Responding to Afghanistan's peril requires actions at a number of levels. The challenges confronting Afghanistan are multifaceted, and any meaningful response must be multi-pronged. If actors in the wider world search for a simple solution to the country's woes, they are likely to waste a significant volume of resources, and achieve little that proves durable. Three major tasks confront the international community.

First, the major powers supporting Afghanistan must improve the coordination of their policy settings, and resist the temptation to play out their policy disputes in public. Ordinary Afghans, who are avid listeners to the BBC and other short-wave radio services, are always watching for signals about the trajectory of Afghan affairs. They rapidly come to know of friction between the different member-states of NATO over strategies for dealing with the Afghan situation, and this does nothing for their faith in the durability of the outside world's commitment. By word and deed, therefore, Afghanistan's friends — Australia included — will need to signal that they are determined that there will be no going back to the sporadic and fitful engagement of the years before September 11, 2001.

Second, it is important that international forces in the troubled south be seen to protect the local population, not just themselves. Some of the contingents contributed to Afghanistan by NATO members have been swathed in such restrictive national caveats on the uses to which they can be put that they offer very little ambient security for Afghans. Reconstruction activity is enormously important, but there are dangers in putting exaggerated reliance on 'inkspot' theories of stabilisation which posit that stability will spread from secure villages and towns across the wider landscape. Such theories assume that the support-base of the 'enemy' will erode in the face of progress on the ground, sapping an insurgency of its vitality. In certain circumstances this can prove a viable strategy, but not when the enemy is committed to total spoiling through terror tactics and relies on externally supplied resources and an external safe haven. Such an opponent demands more active engagement, of the sort that Australian SAS troops have provided to great effect. What is important here is not so much the absolute numbers of troops committed, but rather the establishment of robust common rules of engagement, the development of a coherent sense of mission, and a willingness to take risks if needed to achieve positive outcomes.

Third, unless the problem of Pakistan's meddling in Afghanistan can be effectively addressed, the situation in Afghanistan's south will continue to deteriorate, at an accelerating rate. For decades, successive Pakistan governments have supported religious extremists in Afghanistan, on the basis that they are less likely either to revive the border dispute that marred Pakistan-Afghanistan relations from the 1940s to the 1970s, or make common cause with Hindu-majority India. Pakistan's involvement in supporting the Taliban was sanctioned at the highest levels of the Musharraf government,[9] and Pakistan's position as a partner in combating terror is compromised by the ongoing presence in its political elite of influential formal and informal networks hostile to the struggle against radical extremism. In 2001, the top Taliban leadership escaped to Pakistan, and ever since has been operating from the city of Quetta.[10] Reporting to Congress in January this year, the US Director of National Intelligence described Pakistan as a country 'where the Taliban and al-Qa'ida maintain critical sanctuaries'.[11] Targeting this leadership and these sanctuaries is essential if Afghanistan is to be stabilised. The flow of radicals into southern Afghanistan cannot be staunched simply by forces in Afghanistan itself, and the border is too long and porous to close. The prime target therefore must be the Taliban's leadership, and the real test of Pakistan's goodwill will be its willingness to arrest and hand over the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, his operational military commander Mullah Dadullah, and the other key Taliban officials operating from Quetta. This is a much less daunting task than an assault on the Tribal Areas, and would give effect to Pakistan's formal obligations under paragraph 8(a) of UN Security Council Resolution 1333 of 19 December 2000, which required all states to 'close immediately and completely all Taliban offices in their territories'.

If it fails to do so, Pakistan should expect to be exposed to significant international pressure. This has worked in the past: stern United States warnings behind the scenes to Islamabad prior to Afghanistan's 2004 presidential election sent

a clear signal that disruption of the election would not be tolerated, and polling proceeded smoothly even though the Taliban themselves had both the capacity and the incentive to disrupt it. Pakistan needs to be reminded that it risks aid being scaled back, that it will be viewed as a state sponsor of terrorism, and that states in the wider world will increasingly line up with India on issues which separate the two main states of the Subcontinent. This is not, however, just a matter of regional politics. It also goes to the heart of Pakistan's claim to be a responsible sovereign state. Parts of the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan may indeed be like the 'Wild West', as President Bush put it, but that is no excuse for terrorists with global reach being given free rein to flourish. Sovereignty entails responsibilities as well as rights, and if Pakistan asserts that it is sovereign in these territories, it is also responsible for ensuring that they are not used as safe havens for al-Qaeda and the Taliban. On this issue, the wider world owes Pakistan nothing.

NOTES

[1]See *Breaking point: measuring progress in Afghanistan* (Washington DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 February 2007).

[2]Carlotta Gall, NATO mounts largest attack on Taliban in south, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2007.

[3]A detailed opinion survey in Afghanistan in 2006 found that only 21 per cent of respondents felt that things were going in the wrong direction: See *Afghanistan in 2006: a survey of the Afghan people* (Kabul, The Asia Foundation, 2006) p 9.

[4]Figures cited by Major General Benjamin Freakley, Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force-76 and Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division, US Department of Defense News Briefing, 26 January 2007.

[5]For details, see Marian Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist networks: the Afghan-Pakistan connection* (London, Hurst & Co., 2004); Rizwan Hussain, *Pakistan and the emergence of Islamic militancy in Afghanistan* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005); Daniel Byman, *Deadly connections: states that sponsor terrorism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp 187-218.

[6]Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, Unholy allies: the Taliban haven't quit, and some are getting help and inspiration from Iraq, *Newsweek*, 26 September 2005; Tom Coghlan, British troops may face al-Qa'eda fighters sent from Iraq to Afghanistan, *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 February 2006.

[7]Alan Sipress, Peacekeepers won't go beyond Kabul, Cheney says, *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2002.

[8]William Maley, Looking back at the Bonn Process, in Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra (eds), *Afghanistan: transition under threat* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007).

[9]See Tim Judah, The Taliban Papers, *Survival* 44(1) 2002, pp 68-80; and William Maley, *The Afghanistan wars* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p 221.

[10]See Carlotta Gall, Pakistan link seen in Afghan suicide attacks, *The New York Times*, 13 November 2006; Laura King, Pakistani city serves as refuge for the Taliban, *The Los Angeles Times*, 21 December 2006; Paul Watson, On the trail of the Taliban's support, *The Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 2006; Carlotta Gall, At border, signs of Pakistani role in Taliban surge, *The New York Times*, 21 January 2007; Salman Masood, Pakistan says Taliban activity is hard to stop, *The New York Times*, 3 February 2007; Ann Scott Tyson, General warns of perils in Afghanistan, *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2007.

[11]John D. Negroponte, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence* (Washington DC, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 11 January 2007) p 5. Interestingly, in a 16 December 2006 Letter to the Editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, the minister at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC, in seeking to deny that the Taliban leaders were in Pakistan, had stated that 'because Pakistan's intelligence and security network is very effective', the 'presence of the Taliban leadership could not go unnoticed there'.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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