

## Why Afghanistan?

Robert Marmolejo and Shelton L. Williams

Finally, a war that can and must be won: President Obama announced this February that 17,000 combat troops will be deployed to bolster the American war effort in Afghanistan. The administration hopes these troops will stabilize an increasingly deteriorating situation on the ground. However, winning this war will require more than simply increasing the number of boots on the ground. Allied forces must rely upon the techniques that have proven successful in the Iraq surge, while adapting these techniques in a manner that suits the realities of Afghanistan. The key strategy that American forces adopted in Iraq was to establish multiple smaller bases amongst the population in order to protect civilians from the carnage of war. In doing so, American forces abandoned the concept of operating out of giant forward operating bases whose main goal was to chase and defeat the insurgents. The United States realized that civilian casualties needed to be avoided at all costs in order to avoid swelling the ranks of the insurgency. American forces also cut deals with local groups, separating them from the insurgency and employing them to police their own populations. The same strategy must be employed in Afghanistan to the greatest extent possible.

America and its NATO allies also must have the endurance to undergo what will be a long and hard campaign. It is also imperative that allied forces show the local population that they are there to stay and they will not abandon those who support them to the Taliban. Yet, the United States and NATO must be prepared to accept the unfortunate fact that even if they conduct a counterinsurgency campaign to the best of their ability, success in Afghanistan is not certain.

The United States initially set out in Afghanistan in 2001 to create a modern democracy in a tribal state devastated by decades of foreign occupation and internecine war. Inadequate resources and personnel were deployed for a mission with grandiose and unrealistic objectives. The 2003 invasion of Iraq relegated Afghanistan into an afterthought. Badly needed resources were diverted towards the Iraq war for years. As late as 2008, a Pentagon spokesperson stated that "[t]he chairman of the Joint Chiefs has said time and time again Iraq is a mission we must do. Afghanistan is a mission we do as we can." President Obama now has decided that the United States will no longer attempt to create a modern democracy in Afghanistan, but will concentrate on creating a stable Afghanistan that will not harbor the Taliban or al-Qaeda.

An increasingly resurgent Taliban stymies American efforts to create a viable and stable Afghan state. Insurgents have severely eroded local confidence in the United States, NATO, and the central government in Kabul. A recent report from the International Council on Security and Development paints a grim picture:

[T]he Taliban now has a permanent presence in 72% of the country. This figure is up from 54% in November 2007 ... Moreover, it is now seen as the de facto governing power in a number of southern towns and villages. The increase in their geographic spread illustrates that the Taliban's political, military and economic strategies are now more successful than the West's in Afghanistan ... Simultaneously, the asymmetric threat posed by agile Taliban forces to NATO's ill-equipped, lumbering military machine ensures that genuine security cannot be established in any of the 72% of Afghan territory where the Taliban has a permanent presence. Without appropriate resources at their disposal, NATO is not prepared for the challenge. Indeed, any real difference would require a significant troop increase numbering in the tens of thousands.

The insurgency has adroitly exploited the situation, taking advantage of the inability of American and NATO forces to adequately protect the civilian population of Afghanistan. The Taliban's increasing reach and ability to strike throughout areas once considered pacified and safe has put the United States and NATO on the defensive. The Taliban and other insurgent groups have also established a safe haven within the border regions of Pakistan. American reliance on air attacks against suspected Taliban targets in this region have been ineffective at addressing this problem and have probably increased support for the insurgency amongst the local population.<sup>1</sup> The United States must now lend whatever assistance possible to Pakistani efforts to wipe out Taliban strongholds on their side of the border.

---

<sup>1</sup> (David and Sanger), [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/world/asia/12afghan.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/world/asia/12afghan.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1)

As we argue above, this threat will not be countered simply by adding more boots on the ground. While 17,000 additional troops is a start, recently replaced ISAF and USFOR-A commander General McKiernan had already requested 30,000 troops to be deployed to Afghanistan. Afghanistan expert, Karin von Hippel of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, believes that even 30,000 would only be a stop-gap measure and that the impact would be more psychological than practical. Any additional forces will need to remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future and can not merely be a temporary increase such as the brigades used in the Iraqi surge. McKiernan's replacement, General Stan McChrystal, was most likely tapped to head ISAF and USFOR-A due to his success in heading U.S. special operations and counterterrorism efforts inside of Iraq during the surge. The administration believes his talents and experience will better suit the new direction the Afghan campaign will take.

American and NATO forces in Afghanistan must apply the lessons learned in the Iraq surge while not losing sight of the different challenges that will face them in Afghanistan. Allied forces must slowly and methodically clear areas of Taliban control and protect them against further attacks and infiltration. The local population must be convinced that American and NATO forces are willing to stay and fight and will not sit idly by while the Taliban runs free over the country side. Only once adequate forces are available to protect areas already secured should operations be expanded into new territory. This effort will not only rely on troops provided by the United States and its NATO allies but will require a robust Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police capable of participating in security operations. Allied forces will also most likely need to cut deals with local groups and convince them to support the United States and Kabul over the Taliban.

This new effort must not solely focus on eradicating Taliban forces but must also come hand in hand with a substantial new wave of economic aid and development projects aimed at improving the quality of life for the local population. Afghanistan does not have the benefit of oil revenues or a somewhat modern infrastructure such as that which Iraq possesses. International actors and Kabul have thus far proven ineffective at meeting the basic needs of the Afghan populace. The Afghan people must be shown that they will profit immensely by turning away from the Taliban and supporting the Americans and the central government in Kabul. Serious long term economic investment will be necessary for the foreseeable future to stabilize Afghanistan and to undercut the efforts of the Taliban. The international community and Kabul must prove that they are capable of meeting the basic needs of the Afghan population or they will find it difficult, if not impossible, to wage a successful counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>2</sup>

The United States does not have a good track record in Afghanistan. The United States supported the Mujahedeen in their decade-long struggle against the Soviet Union but quickly left the country after the Soviets' withdrawal from 1987 to 1989. The United States must demonstrate to the Afghans that it is willing to undertake a lengthy campaign and will not once again walk away from Afghanistan in its hour of need. While many are worried that American commitment to such a campaign may result in a lengthy and pointless quagmire similar to Vietnam, the clearly defined mission objectives and the presence of a clear strategy to achieve these goals established by President Obama make such an outcome unlikely. Moreover, the strategic necessity of success in Afghanistan arguably trumps the rationale for the Vietnam War. Afghanistan and Pakistan are where our strategic adversaries threaten us most. To succeed Allied forces must regain the strategic initiative by securing the countryside, eradicating Taliban insurgents, and allowing economic development to proceed. The United States will also need to

---

<sup>2</sup> (The International Council on Security and Development)

work closely with the Pakistani government and develop an effective strategy to address the threat that Taliban strongholds in Pakistan pose to the Afghan people and to Allied efforts to stabilize the country.

Robert Marolejo is a Program Associate at the Osgood Center for International Studies in Washington, DC

Shelton L. Williams is President of the Osgood Center