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On “Reforming the Afghan Security Forces”

Todd Greentree

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This commentary is in response to Daniel Glickstein and Michael Spangler’s article “Reforming the Afghan Security Forces” published in the Autumn 2014 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 3).

Daniel Glickstein and Michael Spangler deserve commendation for their combined effort. It is highly gratifying to see a National Guard soldier and a Foreign Service Officer write an article together about the importance of ANSF force development, acknowledging the indivisible unity of political and military dimensions in the Afghan war. Separation of the civilian and military realms—ironically symbolized in the awkward term ‘whole of government’—remains a strategic weakness of US policy and performance. Had the United States, from leadership on down across two administrations, invested more authentic effort in getting our own civil-military house in order it might have been possible to avoid such enormous profligacy while achieving some measure of enduring success.

Glickstein and Spangler’s central argument is essentially on target: expansion of the Afghan Local Police under the mentorship of Afghan Army Special Forces, with an overlapping system of local and national accountability – and continued international assistance – are essential elements of assuring lasting stability and security in Afghanistan. It is unfortunate that, as is so often the case, available budgets drive strategy rather than the other way around. Rather than comment on the fiscal concerns and force ratio options central to the article, it seems worthwhile to give further consideration to the policy and strategy implications as a whole.

To lend perspective to their proposal, it is important to step back before going forward. As pragmatic and authoritative as they are, the US-Afghan Bilateral Security and NATO Status of Forces Agreements should be seen as something less than strategies for the future. Belated adoption of counterinsurgency and the misfortunately time-bound surge that began in 2009 in reality amounted to compensation for errors committed immediately following overthrow of the Taliban in December 2001. (Diversion to Iraq in 2003 was not the source of those errors, but it did allow them to fester for years.) The opening phase of Operation Enduring Freedom relied on effective economy of force that married US-led special operations proficiency to the Afghan way of war. Operation Enduring Freedom should have evolved from that successful method. Instead, indiscriminate manhunting for Al Qaeda terrorists became entangled in a direct war against tribal Islamism. The resulting precedence given to warfighting over Afghan force development violated T.E. Lawrence’s famous caution that, “It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them.” Thus, the opportunity to build a reasonably effective ANSF at a much more sustainable size – say 50,000 – at the moment when the Taliban had disintegrated and were seeking to align with the victorious side according to Afghan custom, was lost.

Todd Greentree is a Research Associate in the Oxford Changing Character of War Programme. A former US Foreign Service Officer, he has served in five conflicts. In Afghanistan, he was political-military advisor to Task Force Warrior in RC-East and to 5/2 SBCT in Kandahar, and headed the RC-South Initiatives Group in 2010-11.

Thirteen years later, the unilateral US determination that ‘the tide of war is receding’ has resulted in a new Afghan dilemma: drawdown without ending the war. The ensuing resurgence of insurgent-initiated attacks bears out the prediction the Taliban successfully waited for the coalition to weary and have now resumed their offensive in earnest. Discard the politically infeasible option of resuming direct intervention, and the insufficient expedient of relying on drones and covert action to hunt terrorists. This leaves the alternative of developing the ANSF with its dubious variants of size and unsustainability.

What begs clarifying in the first instance is the true aim, something that the article touches on at several points. The policy framework that envisions a long-term partnership for strengthening the Afghan National Security Forces while targeting the remnants of Al Qaeda is creditable, but narrowly conceived. Afghanistan has been for millennia at once a backwater and a crossroads among competing powers. Since 1978, the United States, through action and inaction, has been complicit in the corrosion of war and revolution that Afghanistan has suffered without respite. In the absence of decisive and enduring commitment, these unfortunate conditions will continue; so will the risk of consequences, as both 9-11 and the eruption of ISIS in Iraq and Syria signify.

To add to Glickstein and Spangler’s case in point from Nangarhar, the 10th Mountain Division in Regional Command – South during the main effort of the surge in 2010-11 experienced surprisingly rapid success supporting Afghan leaders – among them the Karzai clan – who rallied their fellow Pashtuns across the South with an appeal to Loy (Greater) Kandahar, a traditional unifying cause. This was no quixotic attempt to win ‘one valley at a time.’ Rather, an integrated campaign plan helped mobilize support for Loy Kandahar to link village, district, and provincial levels politically to Kabul; combined security operations with efforts to reintegrate Taliban into their communities; and recruited Afghan Local Police units while professionalizing the ANSF. These measures served the reciprocal aims of weakening the Taliban in their center of gravity and strengthening the authority and legitimacy of the Afghan state.

Our obligation to the Afghans includes sustained light footprint counterinsurgency that integrates political-military strategy and is based on remembering that our purpose is to help them win their war. This is a key element of the way forward in Afghanistan.

The Authors Reply

Daniel Glickstein

We appreciated Todd Greentree's support for our central thesis that the incorporation of local defense forces into specially mentored local police units would help stand up more sustainable and reliable Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). We also concur with his characterization of the Coalition "surge" strategy of 2010-12 as "belated" and "misfortunately time-bound."

Of course, any "surge" strategy, relying on foreign troops to help consolidate regime change, seems inherently limited in duration due to the high costs involved. As a result, the effectiveness of a surge appears to depend on whether it can serve as a bridge to political agreement among conflict groups or, short of that, the creation of a resilient national security architecture that can outlast conflict groups. In our opinion, the Coalition's surge is under critical scrutiny now mainly because it attempted too many lines of effort, thereby diluting the paramount mission of training and equipping Afghan security forces. Indeed, the literacy component of ANSF training began too late (in 2009 along with the surge) although it constituted a key incentive for improving ANSF retention and building civil society.

While more historical data on the surge needs to be examined, this strategy was partly designed to serve as a bridge to hand wider security operations to the ANSF. The Coalition's own focus on the clear-and-hold function of counter-insurgency, however, proved irresistible as soldier body-counts rose, and the reputation and capability of the Afghan government fell. Especially now, given the withdrawal of American soldiers amidst declining budgets, more resources and attention must be directed towards the new ANSF and the Afghan administration.

As Greentree indicates, too much attention was devoted to Coalition-led efforts to combat hostile groups, while ANSF development was belatedly and too quickly accelerated, contributing to an oversized army and relatively neglected police. Regrettably, this training effort was, and continues to be, hampered by improvised explosive devices, mortar, and insider attacks as well as internal impediments such as drug-use, attrition, absenteeism, and a general lack of will to fight in some areas. Our initial article was devoted primarily to these issues, with the development and institutionalization of localized security to mitigate these threats.

Having served as a foot-soldier, I am well aware there are times enemy combatants will be confronted, but falling into tunnel-vision focused solely upon the enemy and ignoring the civilian population has been a critical failing of the Afghan strategy and must be avoided in the future.¹ I therefore recommend further study be devoted to Greentree's contention that "manhunting for al Qaeda terrorists became entangled

¹ See Lessons Learned from "Key Enablers for Peacekeeping and Stability Operations," *US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute*, <http://pksoi.army.mil/Lessons%20Learned.html>

in a direct war against tribal Islamism.” In particular, some analysts claim the Coalition expanded Taliban recruitment in 2005 partly by trying to identify and detain Taliban suspects in the south and east of Afghanistan.² If true, these actions helped to promote the Taliban resurgence.

By 2010, many Western military analysts argued that only a small percentage of hardened extremists constituted the irreconcilable core of the Taliban. The remaining majority was comprised of Kilcullen’s “accidental guerillas,” civilians swept into the conflict by personal grievances with military forces, those complicit in insurgent strikes out of fear and coercion, or for economic gain. By giving primacy to political reconciliation over kinetic strikes, the Afghan government can and should pursue local defense programs to co-opt this majority into efforts to protect its own communities. The remnants can then be dealt with by localized security forces. This strategy has the potential to end the conflict; a continued kinetic-centric, top-down approach only ensures a perpetuation of the insurgency.

Moving beyond insurgents, the larger stability of the Afghan state is directly tied to the success or failure of its government. Periodic violence seems inescapable, as the current headlines regarding attacks in France and Nigeria show. What matters after the fact are the strength and authority of the state. France’s powerful, legitimate government was able to rally from the recent terrorist attack and bring millions of citizens and foreigners, along with heads of states, to march in the streets of Paris. Nigeria, conversely, continues to suffer from corruption and an impotent government. As a result, the militant group Boko Haram wreaks wider havoc throughout the country.

The desired end-state is a strong, legitimate Afghan government which has the capacity to protect its people and its borders. We must be patient in fostering this development. Afghanistan’s civil society has degraded over the past four decades, and it will take at least that long to help it recover. Without a bottom-up effort, Afghanistan will remain in chaos and a safe haven for extremists. As Scott Mann argues, Afghanistan requires persistent long-term security assistance combining the best practices from places like Colombia with new authorities to enable US Special Operations Forces to assist the Afghan Special Forces in setting up localized defense capabilities.³ Only by going local and changing the game will marginalized Afghan populations re-connect with their government and render violent extremists strategically irrelevant.

2 Marc W. Herold, “The American Occupation of Afghanistan and the Birth of a National Liberation Movement,” *Global Research*, Edited Transcript of a Public lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, August 2010, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-american-occupation-of-afghanistan-and-the-birth-of-a-national-liberation-movement/20946>).

3 Scott Mann, “Bypassing the Graveyard: A new Approach to Stabilizing Afghanistan,” *Small Wars Journal*, July 30, 2014.