

War on the brink of failure

7 obstacles stand in the way of success in Afghanistan

BY LT. COL. DANIEL L. DAVIS

Absent a major change in the status quo that currently dominates in Afghanistan, the U.S.-led military effort there will fail to accomplish the president's objectives and, despite our best effort to spin it otherwise, we will lose the war in Afghanistan.

Many will consider such a declarative statement to be overly pessimistic. Others will be quick to point out that the full contingent of Afghan surge forces was fully deployed only in September and it is too early to make such conclusions. My assessment, however, is not based on what has happened over the past several months, but on events covering the past decade and more generally the past century.

Virtually every American commander in Afghanistan since 2004 has publicly declared that he had the right strategy and implied success was within sight. Here is a partial list of statements made by U.S. and NATO commanders:

■ New York Times, Feb. 18, 2004: "What we're doing is moving to a more classic counterinsurgency strategy here in Afghanistan," Lt. Gen. David Barno, [head of Combined Forces Command – Afghanistan], told reporters at the Pentagon in a videoconference from his headquarters in Kabul. "That's a fairly significant change in terms of our tactical approach out there on the ground."

■ New York Times, May 3, 2006: "Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry is hoping to turn things around this year with new and better local leaders. 'Now we see a lot of those conditions changing,' he said, in an interview."

■ Der Spiegel, Mar. 31, 2008: "My successor will find an insurgency here in Afghanistan, but it is not spreading, contrary to what some people say. Our enemies are not as strong as the NATO alliance in combination with its Afghan brothers." — Gen. Dan McNeill, International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) commander.

■ Washington Post, Feb. 5, 2010: "[Gen. Stanley

McChrystal's] harsh assessments helped to persuade President Obama to order the deployment of 30,000 U.S. reinforcements this year. 'I feel differently now,' he said Thursday. 'I think we made significant progress in setting conditions in 2009 ... that we'll make real progress in 2010.'"

■ NBC News, Meet the Press, Aug. 15: "I didn't come out here to, to carry out a graceful exit or something like that. I came out here committed to achieving our objectives and doing everything that we can to doing that." – Gen. David H. Petraeus.

It is understandable and indeed expected that a commander should do all he can to accomplish the military objectives he has been assigned. But at some point, a frank and sober assessment of ground truth must carry more weight than positive attitudes.

As I wrote in these pages last month ["The spark, oxygen and fuel," AFJ, September], when Petraeus, then commander of Multi-National Force, Iraq, addressed a skeptical Congress in September 2007 on the situation in Iraq, there were a number of fundamentals he could legitimately point to that argued persuasively for giving the effort more time. Today, in Afghanistan, that case is far more difficult to make. Over the past 24 months, the U.S. has increased its combat forces by more than 70,000 and yet even

this enormous increase has proven incapable of checking the upward trend of increasing violence that has continued, unbroken, since late 2004.

Whereas in 2007 several significant fundamentals existed that Petraeus was able to leverage to bring tactical success to our Iraq mission, there is no similar set of fundamentals in Afghanistan to justify the same level of optimism. There is no doubt that Petraeus will do his absolute best to once again find that key game-changing factor that will turn a foundering campaign into a dramatic tactical success. But let's be fair: As good as he is, Petraeus is not a magician. Even the best commander cannot make bricks without straw.

For ISAF to have a chance of taming the insurgency in Afghanistan, there are seven core factors that must be transformed from their current state as a molasses-covered status quo. To give an idea of the monumental task that has been laid

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AFP

Taliban fighters pose with their weapons in Afghanistan's Ghazni province in January. Although weakened immediately after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban is again terrorizing local communities.

on Petraeus' shoulders, all seven of the following elements must be turned from the negative direction they are currently going and into at least a pro-ISAF tilt. Fail at any one and we are likely to lose.

1. History. Going all the way back to the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1839, very few foreign powers have thoroughly pacified indigenous Afghan forces. In the minds of the insurgents in Afghanistan — and critically, also in the understanding of the majority of Afghan civilians — they believe the narrative that their forefathers succeeded in eventually wearing out every invading army, no matter how long it took. To succeed in our effort today, we have to change their deeply held views — which is itself a Herculean task.

2. Pakistan. Nothing is possible in Afghanistan without the complicity and cooperation of Pakistan. For us to accomplish our national goals, Pakistan must shut off the flow of fighters back and forth across the border. So long as the insurgent forces have a safe haven from which to recruit, rearm, refit and then re-attack, we will not succeed. We must now do what we have failed to do in the past nine years: Convince the Pakistani government that it is in its self-interest to back the U.S. at the expense of its sometimes-surrogates of the Taliban.

3. Government corruption. Beginning shortly after the formation of the post-Taliban government in early 2002, corrup-

tion in Afghan governance has risen to levels that go well beyond even culturally acceptable norms. Afghanistan has for years been ranked as the second-to-worst of all world governments in terms of corruption (beaten only by Somalia). The thought that we can reverse this in the next 12 to 18 months when the current Afghan leadership demonstrates no will to do so borders on fantasy. If we do not repair this dysfunction, the people of Afghanistan will never embrace their government nor feel safe enough to stand against the insurgency.

4. Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) capability. It's not a matter of how many men fill uniforms in the ANSF, it is a matter of how capable and honest they are. By every objective evaluation, the ANSF is more than a decade from attaining a minimal independent operating capability.

5. The playbook. When Petraeus burst onto the wider public scene in 2007, his ideas, strategy and efforts were unknown to our enemies. In the intervening three years, however, the Taliban has extensively studied the 2007 Iraq surge, analyzed what al-Qaida did wrong, what Petraeus did right, and has read the counterinsurgency manual cover to cover. As a result, we are facing an enemy who is well-versed in our COIN methods and is proving very effective at thwarting them.

6. The battle for hearts and minds. Too many in the West

imagine the “battle for hearts and minds” as being a contest between the U.S. on the one side, the Taliban on the other and the people of Afghanistan in the middle. Each side tries to woo the Afghan citizens to come to its side. But this is not accurate. Rather, the U.S. is on one side, trying to convince the Afghan people their best chance for a good future lies with us, enticing them with building projects, new schools, roads and promises of a bountiful future if only they’ll reject the Taliban. On the other side, however, you’ve got the Taliban telling the people that if they work with the Western coalition or the Afghan government, the Taliban will kill them, slit their throats, murder their children, destroy their homes, assassinate their leaders and destroy their crops.

Against this remarkably unbalanced engagement, our side has to achieve an enormously higher standard than the enemy, because it is not enough to promise many things, nor even to provide many physical benefits. The people of Afghanistan ask a standing question, and thus far we have not provided a compelling, satisfactory answer: What good is a new road and a wonderful schoolhouse if I do not live to use it? Despite our best “strategic communications” messages to the contrary, the people of Afghanistan see clearly that our promises of security are not being met, while the Taliban’s threats of death are. Until we change this dynamic, we will not win the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan and they will not turn against the insurgency.

7. Cost and what’s possible. If we continue with our current strategy, in the next three to five years we may be able to check the increase in violence and stabilize it at current levels, perhaps even tamping it down to 2008 levels. But that is about the best we can hope for. It is unlikely that any American will consider the expense of more than a decade of war, hundreds of billions of dollars, and the loss of thousands of Americans killed or wounded to be worth it.

IMPEDIMENTS TO PROGRESS

If we’re going to have any chance of turning those seven factors around, there are a few impediments to progress that must be overcome. One of the key areas is the popular myth that suggests the only reason we are fighting an insurgency in Afghanistan today is because the Bush administration “took its eye off the ball” in late 2002 to begin planning for the invasion of Iraq. While this certainly played a role, there is scant evidence to support the contention that it was the primary cause of the Taliban resurgence. A far greater cause

was — and remains — the stunning levels of corruption and incapacity of various levels of governance in Afghanistan. Secondly, the Taliban themselves are responsible. Though they are our enemy, one has to admire the tenacity, singularity of purpose and skill they have demonstrated over the past nine years in returning from the ashes of our post-9/11 offensive to once again become a formidable force.

The consequences of dismissing the negative influence of the Afghan government and the power of the Taliban in fueling the insurgency is that it allows us to dismiss with a wave of the hand the failed efforts the U.S. and later ISAF conducted from 2002 through 2009, implying that we were not culpable for the failure; we simply had the “wrong strategy.” It allows us to now suggest that, for the first time, we have the right strategy to win. The preponderance of evidence, however, strongly reinforces the fact that the same two factors that conspired to permit the Taliban resurgence in the first place are still conspiring to thwart our efforts today — and will continue to do so unless something dramatic changes the dynamics.

Let’s be honest and look at the facts. In early 2009, the Obama administration was preparing to deploy an additional 17,000 troops to “stabilize a deteriorating situation.” I argued in AFJ at the time that if we sent those additional troops, we would likely see an increase in enemy strength, in Taliban attacks and in U.S. casualties, but not see an improvement in the situation [“The Afghan mistake,” April 2009]. That is precisely what happened. Since that article was published, we have deployed approximately 35,000 more troops, and yet in almost the same percentages as before, the Taliban has again grown in size, violence has increased and, through August of this year, a monthly record for American deaths has been set 14 consecutive times.

But by all objective measurements, these additional troops and nine years of combat have done nothing to stem the deteriorating tactical and political situation.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Despite the unbroken trend of Taliban increase and Afghan government incapacity, many continue to plead for more time, assuring anyone who will listen that “this time” things will be different. It is time we acknowledge that our strategy has not and is not likely to change the dynamics on the ground. Owing

BRINK *continued on Page 46*

to the fact that the fundamentals argue persuasively that the status quo will continue to stumble along as it has since 2004, we must therefore make a change in what we are doing — and that change must be dramatic if not radical. At a minimum, this dramatic change should include:

■ **Transition to a counterterrorism focus.** It is time to admit that our vital national interests in Afghanistan involve finding and destroying transnational terror threats, not in fighting a regional counterinsurgency campaign. The U.S., in cooperation with regional allies and Afghan special forces, can wage a successful counter-terrorist campaign (and, indeed, currently do) to ensure that transnational terrorists pay a dear price for attempting to use Afghanistan as a base to plan operations against America.

■ **Remove the bulk of conventional combat forces.** In keeping with the transition to a counterterrorism-focused mission, we should withdraw the majority of our conventional combat units from Afghanistan, transitioning instead to an effort to deepen the capability of the ANSF. We gain little by rapidly expanding the size of the Afghan force without deepening and broadening its capability. With smaller numbers of Afghan soldiers and more U.S. and ISAF troops to train them, we are more likely to develop a capable, sustainable force that is able to provide for its own internal security than our current, larger effort.

■ **Use money as a weapon to battle corruption within Afghan government.** Without radical change in this most crucial area, we will not likely achieve the president's objectives in Afghanistan. I do not dispute the fact that this course of action will entail significant risk, but our current, hands-off approach to Afghan governance is likely to produce failure. We should conduct our own independent investigation of the most critical ministries of the Afghan government, and whichever single organization is found to be the most corrupt, we should threaten — publicly and honestly — to withhold funding for that ministry unless dishonest officials are brought to justice (through appropriate Afghan constitutional means) and corruption curtailed to at least cultural norms. We should not withhold money wholesale from the Afghan government, but should target the most egregious violators. If we prove we are willing and able to show a strong hand in Afghan affairs, we may find other ministries more willing to do what is right and work in the best interests of their countrymen.

While this is unambiguously involving ourselves in the affairs of a sovereign state, we must not lose sight of the equally unambiguous fact that if the Afghan government does not quickly begin making strides to gain credibility in the eyes of its people, we will lose this war, a decade of time and money, and our most precious blood will have been spent without gain.

We owe it to the American public and to the Afghan people who have languished in perpetual war for more than three decades — and we owe it to the thousands of American and coalition service men and women who have been killed or wounded there — to at least give us a chance of success.

If we allow the status quo to remain in effect, hoping that things work out, we will very likely lose this war. **AFJ**

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