

Counterterrorism and Stability in Afghanistan

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I thank the committee for its invitation to address the very important policy problem the United States currently confronts regarding Afghanistan. I will attempt to define the issues at stake and to identify the most important questions that need to be asked. I do so primarily from the perspective of a longtime counterterrorist specialist who also has had past official responsibilities involving Afghanistan and South Asia.

Objective, Mission, and Strategy

The ultimate objective of U.S. endeavors involving Afghanistan is, and should be, to enhance the safety and security of the American people. We need to evaluate whatever we do in South Asia in terms of how much it would further this objective, and at what human and material cost. Much public discourse about Afghanistan has unfortunately failed to distinguish clearly among that ultimate objective, particular missions that may (or may not) advance that objective, and specific strategies for accomplishing a particular mission. The theater commander has quite properly focused on strategies for accomplishing his mission as he currently understands it, which, put very simply, is to stabilize Afghanistan, or at least to prevent the government of Afghanistan from falling. But policymakers in the executive branch and the Congress must confront a larger question: whether stabilizing Afghanistan through counterinsurgency would sufficiently enhance the safety and security of Americans enough that, given the costs entailed, it would be a mission worth pursuing.

We are in Afghanistan as a direct result of, and a justified response to, the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Our troops would not be there today were it not for Americans' collective outrage over 9/11. The prime, overriding purpose of our intervention in Afghanistan is counterterrorism. Whatever other interests we have acquired, or appear to have acquired, during our eight years there and that are part of the public debate today are in this sense secondary, although some of them need to be addressed. This leads to a more refined version of the overall question for policymakers: is the difference between the terrorist threat Americans would face if we wage a counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, and the threat we would face if we do not wage it, sufficiently large—and in the right direction—to justify the costs and risks of the counterinsurgency itself?

Safe Havens

The generally accepted counterterrorist objective in Afghanistan is to prevent terrorist groups, and especially al-Qa'ida, from establishing a safe haven there. Terrorist groups do make use of territorial havens when they have them, as the leadership of al-Qa'ida did in Afghanistan before being roused in the opening weeks of Operation

Enduring Freedom. Groups have used such havens for a variety of purposes, from training recruits to holding planning meetings. Training camps at which such skills as hand-to-hand combat and the handling of firearms are taught require a secure piece of real estate, although these are not the skills most threatening to U.S. interests. Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri remain at large today partly because they found a hospitable haven in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan. But the use by a terrorist group of a territorial haven does not imply that its operations would be significantly impeded if it did not have one. Most important activities that transnational terrorist groups have performed in safe havens also can be performed, often with comparable ease, elsewhere. Terrorist attacks can be conceived anywhere. Operations can be, and often have been, planned and prepared in Western cities. Most recruitment and radicalization takes place outside anything that could be called a safe haven, and again often in the West.

Terrorists' exploitation of information technology, and of the ease of movement that goes under the label of globalization, have made them less dependent than ever before on any physical haven. Terrorist leaders exert command and control through cyberspace at least as effectively as through older methods. As 9/11 demonstrated, the planning, training, and other preparation for a major operation need not be centered in any one location but instead can span several continents.

Considerable discussion has addressed whether a re-establishment by the Taliban of control over portions of Afghanistan also would mean re-establishment of an al-Qa'ida haven there. The connection is not as simple and automatic as is commonly postulated. The Taliban and al-Qa'ida unquestionably still are ideological soul mates, and probably would still find old reasons, and maybe some new ones as well, for continuing or reviving their alliance. But it was al-Qa'ida's transnational terrorist activity that led directly to the most calamitous loss the Taliban have ever suffered—an end to their rule over most of Afghanistan, from a U.S.-led military intervention. And now the Taliban see a United States whose demonstrated willingness to use military force in Afghanistan in a reprisal mode is far greater (and still would be greater even without a counterinsurgency) than it was prior to 9/11. None of this implies that an open break between the Taliban and al-Qa'ida would be likely, but it does at least mean that the conditions of any al-Qa'ida return to Taliban-controlled territory would be a source of strain between the groups. This in turn would affect al-Qa'ida's perceptions of the relative attractiveness of Afghanistan and the current haven in northwest Pakistan. It is hard to discern much that the former would offer over the latter.

In any event, it is not apparent how a move of al-Qa'ida or parts of it from one side of the Durand line to the other would substantially affect the threat the group poses to U.S. interests. Any such threat should be no less from Waziristan than it would be from Nuristan.

Regardless of whether a renewed haven inside Afghanistan were attractive and useful to al-Qa'ida or any other terrorist group, there is the question of whether a counterinsurgency would preclude it. A haven would not require a patron with control over all of Afghanistan, which has an area of 647,000 square kilometers, but instead only a small slice of it. As described in General McChrystal's assessment, a "properly resourced" strategy would leave substantial portions of the country—those portions not deemed essential to the survival of the Afghan government—outside the control of that

government or of U.S. forces. In short, even a counterinsurgency that was successful, in the sense of accomplishing the mission of bolstering the government in Kabul and stabilizing the portions of the country where most Afghans live, still would leave ample room for a terrorist haven inside Afghanistan should a group seek to establish one.

Terrorism Beyond South Asia

A further question is whether a group seeking a haven would require either Afghanistan *or* Pakistan. Radical Islamists, including al-Qa'ida, have other unstable places to which to turn; Somalia and Yemen immediately come to mind. Afghanistan is associated with terrorism not because Afghans are disproportionately inclined to become international terrorists. They are not—notwithstanding the recently publicized case of Najibullah Zasi and the large number of Afghans who have been swept up by Operation Enduring Freedom. Instead, we are seeing a legacy of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the insurgency against it in the 1980s, which attracted foreign (chiefly Arab) jihadists such as bin Ladin and was followed by unending civil war.

The terrorist threat to U.S. interests—even just the Sunni, Salafi, jihadist portion of that threat—does not all emanate from Afghanistan or from any other single place. It is decentralized, more so now than it was at the time of 9/11. It involves a diverse movement with different groups, cells, and individuals having different mixtures of local and global objectives. The movement does not have a central command, even though bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida continues to be the most recognizable part of it. Even some groups that have found it advantageous to adopt the al-Qa'ida brand name, such as the one in the Maghreb of North Africa, act more on local initiative than in response to any orders from South Asia. One hears frequent mention of “links” back to Afghanistan or Pakistan, but links do not necessarily mean direction or instigation. They can mean nothing more—as in what has become publicly known so far about the Zasi case—than having once passed through a training camp. They may mean even less.

Perceptions and Propaganda

Concern has been expressed about broader perceptions that could undermine counterterrorism if the United States were not seen as successfully imposing its will through military force in Afghanistan. Being able to claim victory over the superpower would boost al-Qa'ida and other Islamist radicals, according to this concern. Such perceptions do come into play, and they do matter. Defeat of the Soviet Union—then still a second superpower—in an earlier intervention in Afghanistan unquestionably boosted the morale and aspirations of an earlier generation of jihadists, with effects still being felt today.

But on this issue as on others, one has to consider carefully the difference that a U.S.-led counterinsurgency would or would not make. Once the United States has made a commitment, radicals find ways to claim victory no matter when that commitment ends, and with little reference to how it ends. In the spin game of defining victory and defeat, terrorists have inherent advantages. Even if the U.S. military command achieves everything it sets out to achieve in stabilizing the Afghan government and the portions of the country most Afghans inhabit, al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups will still be out there—in Pakistan, in the unpacified portions of Afghanistan, or elsewhere. They still

will be issuing their audiotapes and other propaganda. And all it takes is a single terrorist attack against U.S. interests to punctuate their boast that they have not been defeated.

This propagandizing is likely no matter what the United States does from this point forward in Afghanistan. A larger and more costly U.S. military commitment may make the propaganda all the more effective by bolstering arguments that the United States has been unable to deliver a knockout blow to the jihadist movement even when it pours large resources into the effort.

Perceptions of what we do militarily in Afghanistan have other effects that are important to counterterrorism. These include resentment over Western troops occupying Muslim lands, and anger over the civilian casualties and other collateral damage that are an inevitable by-product of even the most carefully prepared and executed counterinsurgency operations. The resentment and anger extend throughout the Muslim world but are especially apparent in Afghanistan itself. What previously had been an oasis of goodwill toward the United States has dissipated. There are multiple reasons for this, some of which—including general concern over deteriorating security—suggest that a more robust western military effort to protect the Afghan population might help to reverse the trend. But at least as marked is the anger over damage from western military operations themselves.

These sentiments matter not because we are engaged in a popularity contest but instead because they increase the number of people who support violence against our interests, and the number of people willing to commit such violence themselves. A reflection of this in Afghanistan has been the increase over the past few years in the number of insurgents fighting against us and our allies. We generally label the insurgents as “Taliban,” but many have little or no identification with the extreme ideology of the principal Taliban leadership. In one recent engagement in which U.S. forces suffered heavy casualties, the U.S. command did not even consider the Taliban label to be appropriate, instead describing the insurgents as “tribal militias.”

The Taliban

This observation sheds light on the nature of the Afghan Taliban, and on the question of what danger they do or do not pose to broader U.S. interests. The Taliban are a loosely organized resistance concerned above all with society, politics, and power inside Afghanistan. Despite their ideological affinity to, and proven cooperation with, al-Qa’ida, they are not driven by the transnational objectives associated with bin Ladin and Zawahiri. Their interest in, and antagonism toward, the United States is almost entirely a function of what the United States does inside Afghanistan to thwart their aims there. The Taliban’s values and practices, as demonstrated in their previous rule over most of Afghanistan, clearly are repugnant to our own values. But there is nothing in their origins or objectives to suggest that they will become less insular and inward looking in the future than they are now.

The Taliban are the object of wide dislike among Afghans, based on the earlier experience of their harsh rule. Their lack of cohesiveness is another of their handicaps. The cause most likely to unite them is resistance to foreign occupation of Afghanistan. They will tend to be stronger to the extent that our military presence there is seen as an occupation.

Pakistan

The possible connection of events in Afghanistan to Pakistan has, of course, become a major part of debate on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. Although influencing developments in Pakistan is not why we intervened in Afghanistan, Pakistan's importance requires that the connections, if any, be addressed. Two questions must be asked.

One is how much effect anything happening in Afghanistan is likely to have on the politics and stability of Pakistan. There is a tendency to think of such questions in spatial terms, with visions of malevolent influences suffusing across international boundaries like a contagious disease. But the future of Pakistan will be influenced far more by forces within Pakistan itself. Those forces include the inclinations of the Pakistani population and the will and capabilities of the Pakistani military, which is by far the strongest—in several senses of the term—institution in Pakistan. Pakistan has more than five times the population of Afghanistan and an economy ten times as large. Pakistani policymakers and the Pakistani military have a keen interest in Afghanistan, partly because of concerns about Pashtun nationalism and mostly as a side theater in their rivalry with India. But events inside Afghanistan will not be decisive, or anything close to it, in shaping Pakistan's future.

The other question is exactly what sort of influence, for good or for ill, events in Afghanistan are likely to have on Pakistan even if that influence is marginal rather than decisive. Again, the spatial model of spreading instability tends to dominate thinking, but it is unclear exactly how the model would materialize in practice. Establishment of a hostile regime on one's borders (and we should note that Islamabad's relations with the current Afghan government of Hamid Karzai have been anything but cordial) may weaken one's own internal stability if it offers substantial new resources to an internal opposition or provides a base of operations that the opposition previously lacked. But even establishment of an Afghan Taliban state or proto-state would not do these things to Pakistan. Even if the Afghan Taliban—who have been beneficiaries more than enemies of the Pakistani government—decided to turn their attention away from consolidating domestic power to try to stoke an Islamist fire in Pakistan, they would have few additional resources to offer. And the Pakistani Taliban already have bases of operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which appear as part of Pakistan on maps but which Islamabad has never effectively controlled.

In the meantime, an expanded U.S.-led counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is more likely to complicate than to alleviate the task of Pakistani security forces, insofar as it pushes additional militants across the Durand line. A larger U.S. military presence in the immediate region also would make it politically more difficult for the Pakistani government to cooperate openly on security matters with the United States, in the face of widespread negative sentiment inside Pakistan regarding that presence.

Costs and Benefits

We Americans are most comfortable defining our struggles against foreign threats in terms of warfare over identifiable pieces of territory. So it is unsurprising that counterinsurgency in Afghanistan has become a kind of surrogate for thinking about the task of countering contemporary Islamist terrorism. But military force is only one tool for performing that task, South Asia is only one possible region for wielding that tool,

and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is only one possible way of wielding it even in that region. Protecting Americans from terrorism will depend at least as much on the less visible, day-to-day counterterrorist work of our own and allied security services. The degree of terrorist danger to Americans also will depend in large measure on sentiments around the globe—shaped in large part by our own policies—that will lead some people to try to do the United States violent harm, or to support or sympathize with the efforts of those who do.

We Americans also are most comfortable in thinking about such struggles in absolute terms—of victory rather than defeat, of success rather than failure, and of “doing whatever it takes” to win. But the present policy problem (like many others) offers no clear conception of victory. The policy process must discard absolutes and instead carefully weigh costs and benefits of each contemplated course of action, including the direct expenditure of blood and treasure in waging counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, while recognizing that estimates of costs and benefits are inevitably uncertain, that no course assures success, and that every course entails risks.

Conclusion

My own weighing of these considerations leads to the conclusion that an expanded military effort in the cause of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan would be unwarranted. The benefits in terms of ultimately adding to the safety and security of Americans would be marginal and very questionable. At best, the difference such an effort would make in the terrorist threat facing Americans would be slight. At worst, the effort would be counterproductive and not reduce the threat at all. Even at its best, the benefit would be outweighed by the probable costs—especially in lost American lives and limbs but also in monetary resources and other U.S. equities—of the counterinsurgency.