



Uncomfortable Questions

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PHOTO: U.S. Army, SGT Michael Espejo, 66th Military Police Company, Fort Lewis, WA, pulls security on the Pakistani border at Torkham Gate during the Afghan Independence Day ceremonies, 19 August 2007. (U.S. Army, PFC Daniel M. Rangel)

THAT UNITY OF EFFORT toward an adequately defined objective is a prime precondition for military success is axiomatic. In Afghanistan, however, many uncomfortable questions regarding the exact nature of the international effort remain unspoken in public, and thus undebated by Western political leaders. Even at the highest levels, military leaders have constructed the war in Afghanistan as a fight *against* the Taliban. This almost guarantees our national failure. Instead, we should explain to the American people that the U.S. effort is a fight *for* the uncommitted Pashtun population of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Only in this way can we clearly define a war strategy that creates the conditions for a sustainable peace and is synchronized with our national strategy and national character. We require a sustainable engagement strategy, not merely an exit strategy. It must be one that understands that stability and governance in Kabul is a function of stability and governance in Islamabad and vice versa, and a policy that considers Pashtun combat power and stability in Pakistan. Such a policy will recognize the conditions under which Pakistan maintains its internal stability and its ability to remain a deterrent against India. Without sustained engagement, these goals will likely fail.

Led by the United States, NATO must clearly answer three uncomfortable questions:

- Is Afghanistan, as currently constituted, a viable nation-state?
- Is the Hazara-manned, Tajik-dominated Afghan National Army (ANA) the correct mechanism for counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan?
- Is the survival of the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani government the primary NATO foreign policy goal in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Posing these questions forces us to reexamine our operational and strategic objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan, objectives that we are unlikely to achieve until we fundamentally reevaluate our assumptions about Afghanistan itself, the achievable roles and missions of the Afghan Security Forces, and the impact of those decisions on both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Our lack of understanding of the first principles of engagement in Afghanistan makes even an attempt to negotiate with elements of the Taliban a potentially self-abortive effort. In the case of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), this “unexamined life” perpetuates significant structural deficiencies imposed or suggested by the GIROA’s Western sponsors. In the case of the United States, lack of any debate of first principles may result in a strategy implemented by various government departments working at cross purposes. Afghanistan as currently constructed will always be inherently unstable. The operational objective of a stable Afghanistan may be impossible to achieve.

The Myth of the “Graveyard of Empires”

It is common, though incorrect, to describe Afghanistan as the “Graveyard of Empires.” This trite saying has created a self-fulfilling prophecy and the easy post-war explanation that Afghan missions are doomed to failure before execution by immutable factors of terrain, population, and culture. While no one familiar with Afghanistan would describe it as less than dizzyingly complex, it is also a fact that the United States faced and defeated a much better supported and nationally popular insurgency in Vietnam and did so on terrain as daunting as that in Afghanistan.

We must have no doubt that Afghanistan is viable, but to broadly frame the concepts of “Afghanistan” and “viable,” we must understand Afghanistan’s history and political development, and that of its neighbors in the region. The borders of Afghanistan are generally understood and accepted, which is one major problem already solved. This has its negative connotations in that Afghanistan becomes the place for Shi’a who are not Iranian, Uzbeks who are not Uzbeki, Tajiks who don’t have Tajik passports, and Pashtuns who don’t view themselves as Pakistani. Obviously, the construct of Afghanistan is somewhat viable, else it would have long ago joined the legion of nations that no longer exist. Even at its most isolated and damaged, Afghanistan has persisted. However, its existence was predicated on minimal interference in provincial affairs by the Kabul-based national government.



(photo courtesy of author)

Locally recruited police have access to the population that the National Army does not.

Why Afghanistan persists is partially a function of Great Power politics, which gives the “Graveyard of Empires” concept some currency. However, it is much more instructive to view Afghanistan as a proto-nation, or a nation at an exceedingly low level of political development. Like sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan lacks any applied template of effective, let alone broadly popular, political governance. Failures, roadblocks, and challenges in establishing nontribal government in Afghanistan should come as no surprise. We are asking a generally preliterate and brutalized people to accept the lessons it took others over 2,000 years to learn. If viewed in this fashion, we should be shocked by any success, not failure.

However, success is highly important to the United States and the greater global community. Success or failure is not just about a medium-sized Central Asian nation. Failure in Afghanistan is a threat to the stability of the region as whole. Given these stakes, we must understand that the tools of government must be viable and sustainable. Our attempt to immediately foist a highly centralized, Western European-styled, social-democratic constitution on Afghanistan was neither well thought out nor well explained. Amending the current constitution, with

the goal of producing popularly elected, empowered provincial governors would be a much easier bridge to cross, while simultaneously removing one of the primary “recruiting points” of the Taliban. This decentralization of power would minimize the negative impact should the president of Afghanistan fail to have the restraint of a Cincinnatus in wielding his currently broad powers. Although Afghanistan has survived and remained within its colonial boundaries, this is not proof that it is inherently stable. Maintaining Afghanistan as defined by its existing borders requires an exceptionally deft or brutal governance. Well-meaning incompetency may prove fatal.

The ANA and the Once and Future Northern Alliance

In the wake of the creation of the GIRoA, the Northern Alliance was a logical foundation for the Afghan National Army. However, as obvious and easy as this solution was, it appears that integrating significant Pashtun involvement in the ANA was never a priority. The downside to the lack of consideration of broad-ranging Pashtun involvement has created a dynamic that has imparted velocity to the insurgent. In political form, the complaint among Pashtuns is that the GIRoA is not representative of their interests. Outside the boundaries of Kabul, the ANA serves as the most visible face of the Karzai-led regime. In turn, this has created an information operations nightmare in which the Taliban has their primary messages—GIRoA disinterest and Taliban legitimacy—essentially placed in their hands by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and GIRoA.

We have created much of the information warfare ammunition that our enemies use to generate their combat power. While it was understandable that Pashtun interests were given short-shrift in considerations immediately following the fall of the Taliban, at this point counterinsurgency doctrine

and common sense demands that some mechanism is created to give the Pashtun population some “buy-in” to the GIRoA that they presently lack. Benign neglect is expected by the Pashtun and likely acceptable to them, but dominion by multi-millennial enemies via their national army is not.

The non-Pashtun populations are not going to share nor diminish their own combat or political power in order to placate Pashtun concerns, nor, considering their recent and ancient history, should we make them. We should discuss a “democratization” of armed forces in Afghanistan along with attempts to introduce some tribal equities into GIRoA operations, especially the manning and employment of the Afghan National Police (ANP). If the GIRoA doesn’t want external control over ANP, it will have to accept a degree of “warlordism.” This is not necessarily bad, and can be used as an effective mechanism for GIRoA central control, as the warlords should be given significant power to police themselves. While repugnant to Western sensibilities, this is a proven and accepted *modus operandi* in Afghan history.

Many commanders who have served in Southern Afghanistan have noted with anger and dismay the lack of involvement from the relatively well-trained and unquestionably well-equipped ANA. The “whys” for this inefficacy have often been ignored as irrelevant by maneuver commanders. This is mostly because at the tactical level, ANA tactical failures probably are irrelevant. Strategically, they are of vital importance. The predominant theories for ANA failings fall into three main camps. One is simply the lack of ANA interest in the future of southern Afghanistan. The ANA’s Tajik-dominated leadership views the situation there as less than relevant to their concerns. A second theory is the implicit understanding that the establishment of robust ANA capability will be an excuse for ISAF forces to quickly withdraw. A third and more nuanced explanation is that the ANA understands better than anyone else that Hazarras led by Tajiks killing Pashtuns is counterproductive to the stability of southern Afghanistan, that their best strategy is to stay in their bases and limit their actions to highway security and minimizing interaction with the Pashtun people. Regardless of the “why,” the ANA in its current demographic form as the primary vehicle for internally based COIN in Afghanistan

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must be understood as fundamentally flawed and almost certainly doomed to failure.

The Western sensibility desires a multi-cultural Afghanistan, and, by extension, a multi-cultural ANA. This prime U.S. operational objective is not understood by the Pashtun population. The ANP, largely locally recruited, serves as a much more viable, effective, and tolerable force for COIN. Despite their many admitted shortcomings, they remain better trained, equipped, and led than the Taliban forces they face. To reverse current trends in southern Afghanistan, it is necessary to transition COIN effort away from an ANA-based force toward an ANP-based force.

The lack of unity of effort by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is magnified by the current splitting of the chains of command starting at the ministerial level. The ANA, working for Ministry of Defense, and the ANP, working for Ministry of Interior, are a disjointed and often counterproductive total Afghan National Security Force. They should both work for the same commander at the provincial level at least. This provincial ANSF commander must further have a commitment from and responsibility to the provincial governor. Discussions of talks between Karzai and the Taliban only exacerbate the situation. The (arguably) two most despised Afghan power brokers appear to be solely interested in consolidating their significant and disruptive military and political advantages rather than adjusting to the needs and desires of the Afghan People. Such negotiations must be preceded by identifying and implementing mechanisms that increase the voice of the currently ignored populations rather than entrenching both the current failing and previously failed governments.

The Afghan Border Patrol, currently one of the more neglected legs of ANSF, might have the best of both worlds. Their structure is more akin to the ANA, authorizing the military structure and heavy weapons to provide combat power overmatch against anti-GIRoA forces. Border patrol recruiting and manning are much more local in nature, often employing soldiers from the same tribes who for centuries have maintained the areas surrounding the present border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. A transfer of ANA forces to the border patrol could possibly reinforce

a neglected aspect of our strategy as well as alleviate many concerns among the Pashtun people.

The role of the National Directorate of Security certainly needs to be evaluated and reconsidered. The directorate is perceived to be descended from “KHAD,” the Afghan franchise of the Soviet KGB. The National Directorate of Security remains dominated by the former Parcham faction. While overt endorsement of socialism is gone, the local Pashtuns still identify it by name and associate it with educated, Dari-speaking Kabul. The directorate has significant leadership links with the GIRoA’s Pashtun leaders, but remains distrusted by the non-Dari speaking Pashtun population within the south despite its creeping Pashtunization. The integration of an organization such as this by Western forces in the overall security strategy remains neglected as the equivalent simply doesn’t exist in Western society. Yet they continue to wield real, and at times disruptive, power.

The tangled security structure leads to several different armed factions working for different leaders, with different tactical, operational, and strategic objectives. On occasion, these factions can be a vital enabler of ISAF, but lack of coordination is often self-defeating. The varying levels of training, command boundaries, and U.S. mentorship lead to significant shortcomings in the overall effort to make Afghans responsible for their own security. Counterinsurgency is a challenge in the best of situations; the present ANSF structure, as well as its integration with ISAF, unduly impedes COIN efforts at the tactical level and undermines Afghan stability.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Policy and Minority Rule in Pakistan

Most Americans, even those familiar with the Afghanistan situation, are not well informed on the prevailing policies that drive governance in Pakistan or the nature of that governance. A myriad of political and economic influences shape Pakistani policy toward Afghanistan and, not incidentally, Pakistani internal politics.

The first and most important of these influences is “strategic depth,” which has influenced Pakistani policy toward Afghanistan for decades. Based on Pakistani fears of Indian conventional combat power, and in recognition of the limitations of Pakistani



(photo courtesy of author)

The Zabul Province security team plan a cordon and search of Qalat City, Afghanistan.

geography, “strategic depth” essentially states that Afghanistan represents a part of Pakistan for political, military, and economic considerations. Pakistan must insist on a pliant (if not directly controlled) Afghan state to provide it with the economic, geographic, and military depth to successively deter an Indian *coup de main*.

This policy of Pakistani interference in Afghan affairs is based upon broad consensus in Pakistani political and strategic policy circles, and, as stated earlier, is a hallmark of historic Pakistani thought. Such a policy led the Pakistan government to support the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. It is likely that Pakistan was convinced that its decades of experience with Kashmiri militants, along with its experience in managing the unruly Pashtun tribes of the then Northwest Frontier Provinces (now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa), would allow it to successfully create an Afghan government suitably receptive to Pakistani concerns.

The eventual dynamic of the Al-Qaeda marriage to the Taliban has overturned this Pakistani calculus. Indeed, it is unlikely that any nation-state in modern times has been faced with such a seismic shift in its operating foreign policy principles as the Pakistanis have recently faced. The Al-Qaeda and Taliban marriage has resulted in the destruction of the heretofore effective Pakistani mechanism of control of the Pashtuns via a combination of tribal engagement, economic incentives, and social autonomy. Instead, the new generation of radicalized Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen declared war upon Pakistan, resulting in the eventual Pakistani Taliban (known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or the Taliban Movement of Pakistan) takeover of the Swat Valley in 2006. The Pakistani military, to its credit, has responded by resolutely taking the fight to the Pakistani Taliban, but the radicalization of the Pashtuns has been accompanied by the creeping radicalization of Punjabi poor of Pakistan. Depending on evolving

conditions within Pakistan, the elements and tactics used for decades to avoid radicalization, like political and economic patronage, might be losing their effectiveness. The success that the Pakistani Taliban has had in radicalizing the formerly docile but desperately poor Punjabi minority, along with the unpopularity of the Pakistani military's domestic operations, have created a significant challenge to the Pakistani government. The effects of this radicalization were clearly shown with the assassination of Punjabi Governor Salman Taseer in January of last year. This loss certainly highlights the pressures on Pakistan's stability.

Ultimately, the international community must determine whether a decentralized Afghanistan serves to deflect Pashtun frustrations away from the strategically critical government in Islamabad. In other words, would a stabilized Afghanistan lead to a more destabilized Pakistan? Can we convince Pakistan that a stable, functionally neutralist Afghanistan is of greater strategic benefit than a pliant one? The risks of Taliban rule in Kabul shrink in comparison to Islamist rule in Islamabad. Pakistan's often bewildering actions can be understood when viewed from this perspective. ISAF may want a democratic, stable, prosperous, and Western-oriented Afghanistan, but it is naïve to think all our partners believe such an outcome is in their best interest.

The Way Ahead

American policy in Afghanistan must clearly and loudly state our support for Pakistani stability and security while continuing to demand the cessation of Pakistani policies that are manifestly counter to this end. Additionally, American policy must demand from the GIRoA an acceptance of a degree of Pashtun-dominated government-affiliated combat power, with the concurrent agreement that creating more capable Afghan Border Patrol or ANP is not the acceptance of a suicide pact. The demand for security deliverables is an absolute prerequisite for the build-up of Pashtun combat power. Starting to cut the Gordian Knot of Pakistani stability resting on Afghan weakness is the essential first step to the creation of an enduring security structure for South and Central Asia

As uncomfortable as these questions and their inevitable discussions are, worse still is holding on to simple and myopic objectives removed from the realities of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. If we are to buck conventional wisdom and succeed in this most critical of strategic lands, we must deal with the Pashtun people. They are neither our enemies nor an obstacle. Rather, they simply are. Understanding their concerns while assuaging the legitimate concerns of their neighbors will help us develop a coherent strategy that embraces the people whose cooperation we require for lasting success. **MR**

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