



Strategic Level Advising in Afghanistan

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Introduction

On Christmas Day 2014 at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, President Barack Obama told a gathering of troops at a mess hall that U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan will end within a month.¹ However, the United States has committed a sizable troop presence in the country for the next two years to continue to train and support the Afghan government.² Even though the United States has formally ended its 13-year combat mission, the war in Afghanistan continues. The Afghan government faces a strong insurgency that has been gaining momentum over the last year making 2014 the deadliest for Afghan security forces.³ Concurrently, the Afghan government has been struggling to demonstrate its ability to govern and protect the population: corruption, mismanagement, and cronyism are just a few of the underlying issues.⁴ Afghanistan's success is a concern to the United States due to the strategic significance of the region; Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian States are all areas of vital U.S. national interest.⁵

Reflecting back on the lessons of the U.S. war in Iraq, one can identify many similarities from the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 that are applicable to the conflict in Afghanistan today. The United States departed Iraq, leaving a weak central government that faced a viable insurgency that has targeted Iraqi government security forces and political leaders.⁶ Additionally, the withdrawal of its forces left the U.S. with reduced influence within the Iraqi government and the region.⁷ Last year, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that the “failure” to maintain a U.S. presence in Iraq and to support the Iraqi government created a vacuum for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to fill within the region.⁸

As the United States ends its combat mission in Afghanistan, it must continue to provide strategic and operational level advisors within Afghan key ministries and operational security commands in order to ensure the survival of the Afghan central government. This long-term approach that consists of a small U.S. footprint will allow the continued

development of Afghan government capability, maintain oversight on aid and material, and maintain influence within Afghanistan and the region. The United States must be willing to maintain this long-term approach to give the Afghan central government sufficient time to refine institutional systems and governing capabilities.

Develop Afghan Government Capability

Maintaining U.S. advisors within Afghan government ministries and operational security commands will ensure the survival of the government by providing knowledge and expertise needed to develop Afghan government institutions. This year marked a historic milestone for the newly formed Afghan government: a peaceful transition of power through the ballot box. While not perfect, the election process worked in transferring power despite multiple reports of ballot fraud and mismanagement.⁹ Assisted by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr.

Abdullah Abdullah were able to work a compromise through a democratic process that allowed power to be shared equitably creating a coalition government.¹⁰

While advancing in democratic initiatives, the Afghan government faces many challenges ahead as the new coalition administration comes to power. Corruption and mismanagement plague the central government at all levels.¹¹ Ministries and various agencies are often unable to account for funds that are lost through multiple layers of corrupt or poorly educated officials.¹² Additionally, cronyism adds to government mismanagement by allowing those with close ties to government officials to benefit from corrupt activities.¹³ Often this is conducted along ethnic lines that run strong throughout the country and its governing structures having been an acceptable cultural practice for hundreds of years.¹⁴

Afghan ministries and government bureaucratic structures face several challenges going forward. Government bureaucracies are still developing and require time to allow

systems and procedures to take the place of personal patronage networks in which loyalty is rewarded above performance.¹⁵ Also there is a shortage of professional, educated civil servants in which many government officials were selected due to their patronage instead of education or experience.¹⁶ The result is that many government officials lack the experience and level of education needed to run large, complex government agencies.

At the operational level, government security forces have demonstrated recent successes but still need continued effort in developing their capabilities. Operational level leaders within the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior lack the ability to conduct combined arms integration and external coordination.¹⁷ This lack of integration in turn reduces the ability of the government to effectively employ national power against insurgent forces who are not constrained by international borders. Additionally, Afghan government ministries lack professionally trained and educated operational and strategic leaders.¹⁸ Even though an emphasis on leader development has taken root within government culture, continued educational programs and professional mentorship are needed to allow professional growth. As security forces continue to develop systems and capability, they are simultaneously targeted by insurgent forces seeking to cause fractures among the various government security agencies.¹⁹

Maintaining U.S. advisors at the strategic and operational level would allow the training and development of Afghan government capability which would counter many of the above challenges.²⁰ Through their professional backgrounds, combat experiences, and institutional knowledge, U.S. military and civilian advisors can provide valuable advice and expertise to

Afghan ministries and security forces.²¹ Many of the Afghan government ministries and bureaucratic systems were based on U.S. government models. U.S. advisors with experience and knowledge on these systems can be instrumental in developing Afghan government leaders and bureaucratic managers. U.S. advisors can provide feedback on internal systems and recommend ways to streamline efficiencies and management practices. U.S. advisors can assist Afghan agencies to assess themselves and allow them to make changes that they feel will be more beneficial to their success as opposed to having an external party recommend changes.

By having a small number of skilled and knowledgeable advisors at the ministerial level, the United States can have a profound effect at the strategic level while maintaining a small footprint within the country.²² The minimal cost and limited resources associated with this approach will have a lasting impact on the Afghan government even as the U.S. reduces military expenditures over the next decade as a result of the 2011 Budget Control Act.

Another area in which U.S. advisors can develop Afghan capability to allow the survival of the central government is by providing it confidence in its ability to secure and govern the country. A sustained cadre of U.S. advisors within key Afghan government agencies will demonstrate U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and allow continued training and development.²³ Maintaining U.S. government personnel on the ground in Kabul will have a greater effect than words alone. This effort will demonstrate to the people of Afghanistan and the world that the threat of terrorism is a global issue, not just isolated to Afghanistan. Proving U.S. commitment, the visible presence of advisors will increase the confidence

of the Afghan government by providing the advice and resources it requires to grow capabilities to succeed over the long term.²⁴

Maintain Oversight on U.S. Aid and Material

Another benefit of maintaining U.S. advisors within Afghan government ministries and operational security commands is it provides oversight on U.S. foreign aid and material programs. Over the last decade of war, the U.S. provided nearly \$93 billion in assistance to the Afghan central government of which approximately \$56 billion has been used to train and equip Afghan security forces.²⁵ During fiscal year 2014 alone, the United States appropriated over \$6.1 billion to Afghanistan, including \$4.7 billion to train and equip its security forces.²⁶ The majority of aid went to the security sector; however, ministries other than the Defense and Interior received funding for other programs designed to strengthen democratic platforms and stabilize the Afghan government. Even though Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown an average of 9 percent per year since 2001, revenues are still short of annual government budgets.²⁷ In 2013, government revenues totaled less than \$2.5 billion but the annual budget for the year was \$7 billion.²⁸ As the data shows, the Afghan central government is highly dependent on the external aid it receives from the U.S. and international community which is critical to its survival.

The long term goal for the Afghan government is to reduce its reliance on foreign aid as the international community experiences a growing level of "donor fatigue."²⁹ To achieve financial independence, U.S. officials seek greater Afghan integration into regional trade and investment partnerships as part of the "New Silk Road" economic initiative.³⁰ Afghanistan's

membership into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2005 and acceptance into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2012 as an observer nation are positive steps forward in this area.³¹ Additionally, there has been much optimism for Afghanistan to draw upon its vast potential of mineral and agricultural resources.³² Much effort has been made by the international community and private investment over the last few years to extract Afghanistan's estimated wealth of natural resources.³³

Even if these economic initiatives succeed, Afghanistan will be dependent on foreign aid for some time in the near future making foreign aid, the United States being the largest contributor, critical for Afghanistan's success as a nation. In order to maintain oversight and accountability of taxpayer dollars, the U.S. will need to maintain a transparency mechanism to ensure its resources are utilized in support of U.S. objectives within the country.

Despite receiving much support from the U.S. and international community, corruption and mismanagement within the Afghan central government reduces the overall effectiveness of the foreign aid it receives; Afghan officials have stated that corruption is a significant problem within their government.³⁴ During the administration of President Hamid Karzai, many high-level officials were not prosecuted for corruption charges by law enforcement officials due to their personal connections with those in power.³⁵ Lacking strong and stable institutions, the Afghan government is heavily influenced by personal patronage networks in which power brokers exploit government resources to protect and benefit those who demonstrate loyalty.³⁶ Further adding to the issue of corruption, most

ministries and agencies within the central government lack efficient accounting systems to allow for the transparency expected from donor nations on expenditures.³⁷ Weak institutions that lack adequate oversight and accounting mechanisms become victim to corruption and mismanagement; it is in this area that the U.S. can significantly assist the Afghan government.

By maintaining U.S. advisors in Afghan government agencies and operational security commands, the United States can achieve two objectives. First, U.S. advisors can provide a layer of accountability that can monitor the flow of U.S. aid in Afghanistan to ensure it reaches its intended destination. Advisors can provide periodic reports to U.S. government accounting organizations such as the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) that details where funding goes or more importantly, where it does not go.³⁸ Corrupt Afghan officials and their illegal activities would be identified more quickly with the U.S. advisor presence providing a level of deterrence. Government officials would think twice about engaging in corrupt activities knowing there would be consequences as the U.S. would have a network established to identify those involved in corrupt activities. Also, the oversight ability provided by U.S. advisors is a responsible measure that will assure Congress that U.S. resources are being used as intended as it continues to approve funding.

The second objective that U.S. advisors can achieve is to assist Afghan government institutions in developing adequate accounting mechanisms. Most corruption goes unchecked due to the weak institutional structure and level of education of government bureaucrats.³⁹ Receiving U.S. advisor mentor-

ship and developing accounting mechanisms, Afghan institutions will have better transparency over their officials and become more capable of holding them accountable for their illegal actions. As Afghan oversight mechanisms are professionalized and strengthened by advisors, the United States can reduce its presence in this area and shift efforts elsewhere within the government.

Maintain Influence within Afghanistan and the Region

The final benefit in maintaining U.S. advisors within Afghan government ministries and operational security commands is it will maintain U.S. influence within the Afghan government and South Asia region. Geographically, Afghanistan is situated in a “bad neighborhood” which contains many irresponsible state governments and dangerous non-state actors. Considered a viable threat to the U.S. national security, terrorist groups and other hostile non-state actors are prevalent within the region.⁴⁰ These groups have demonstrated through their actions that they seek to harm the U.S. and its allies and are thus a viable threat to national security.⁴¹ At the political level, Afghanistan borders many nations that are security concerns for the U.S., specifically Iran and Pakistan.⁴² The actions and stability of these countries who operate within the international order have a direct impact on U.S. national security. Being geographically located in the center of several terrorist networks that seek harm against the U.S. and nation states that are vital national security interests makes Afghanistan central to U.S. strategy in the region.⁴³

One of the main U.S. objectives in Afghanistan continues to be the destruction of terrorist networks that maintain support

bases within the region.⁴⁴ The Obama Administration’s strategic goal is to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a safe-haven for international terrorism.⁴⁵ The United States has been able to degrade many of these networks over the last decade of war, but these organizations have been resilient and continue to pose a threat to U.S. interests within the region.⁴⁶ While degraded, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other terrorist groups are still able to conduct attacks and maintain limited offensive operations focused on the U.S. and its regional allies.⁴⁷

Another regional concern for the United States is Afghanistan’s neighboring states. Bordering Afghanistan to the west, Iran has consistently challenged U.S. interests over the last three decades. Iran is a security concern to U.S. interests due to its support of terrorist networks operating in the Middle East, partnership with the Bashar al-Assad Regime in Syria, and its growing ambition to develop nuclear technology.⁴⁸ Iran’s immediate goal in the region is to deny the United States the use of Afghanistan as a base that could be used against Iran, and it has publicly opposed the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement.⁴⁹ As part of Iran’s longer term objective, Iran seeks to exert its traditional influence over western Afghanistan due to its historical ties to that part of the country.⁵⁰

Another nation vital to U.S. interests that borders Afghanistan is Pakistan. A key partner in the region, Pakistan is a concern to U.S. policy due to its possession of a large nuclear arsenal, questionable relationships with terrorist networks, and rivalry with India, another nuclear-armed state.⁵¹ The stability of the Pakistani government is critical in maintaining control over its population and

subduing terrorist networks but more importantly, securing its vast nuclear arsenal.⁵² Pakistan is crucial to Afghanistan’s future, and its policies and actions toward Afghanistan are of significant concern to U.S. policymakers since it has strategic influence within the region.⁵³

All of these various state and non-state actors with different agendas within the region are a concern to U.S. interests. The Afghan government is still young and developing its capability to govern which makes it vulnerable to external influence.⁵⁴ Terrorist networks have consistently targeted Afghan government centers of gravity in order to influence the government toward insurgent objectives.⁵⁵ At the state level, many surrounding countries seek to establish influence within Afghanistan in order to advance their own national security objectives.

By maintaining advisors in Afghan government agencies and operational security commands, the United States can continue to exert influence both within Afghanistan and the region which will maintain balance and stability. Advisors embedded inside government agencies will continue to advise and assist, and this will provide the United States a voice in the government each time Afghan officials meet to discuss policy. As seen in Iraq after the U.S. force withdrawal, not having advisors embedded within the central government will significantly reduce U.S. influence.⁵⁶ The ability of U.S. advisors to monitor resource control measures and maintain close personal relationships will ensure the continuation of democracy and government reforms in line with U.S. policy. External state and non-state actors will be limited in their ability to project influence as they will see it dominated by U.S. objectives.

Advisors embedded within the Afghan government will be able to reinforce U.S. policy in Afghanistan more effectively due to their physical presence within the government.

The advisor presence in Afghan ministries will also allow the United States to project influence outside the country and across the region. The presence of U.S. personnel within Afghanistan will demonstrate U.S. resolve and commitment within the region. U.S. policy is more effective and credible when U.S. personnel are on the ground to follow through

on prior commitments.⁵⁷ Another benefit is that the United States will have the ability to project hard power within the region as it will be able to maintain access to several bases.⁵⁸ These bases can be used to synchronize intelligence capabilities and execute lethal targeting operations in line with U.S. policy in the region if required. The removal of U.S. advisors will in turn deny the U.S. continued access to these critical infrastructure nodes that will be much harder to stand up again in the future if needed.⁵⁹

Conclusion

As the U.S. combat mission ends, it is important that the United States continues to provide strategic and operational level advisors within Afghan key ministries and operational security commands in order to ensure the survival of the Afghan central government. This effort can achieve U.S. strategic interests with minimal resources especially as government spending becomes more constrained in the future. This long-term approach which consists of a small U.S. footprint will allow the develop-

ment of Afghan government capability, maintain oversight on aid and material, and maintain influence within Afghanistan and the region.

The U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan ended in 2014; however, the war will continue despite the U.S. role or level of interest in the region. In order to maintain regional stability in South Asia, it is imperative that the United States does not repeat the strategic mistakes of its hasty withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 which has caused turmoil in that region ever since its departure. ■

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