

Finding a way forward in Afghanistan
by Raspal Khosa

50

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The Obama administration is locked in an intense struggle over how to proceed in Afghanistan as the war enters its ninth year. The policy debate in Washington has seen its various protagonists advancing minimalist 'enemy-centric' and maximalist 'population-centric' counter-insurgency (COIN) approaches. It also follows a sobering campaign assessment by the Commander of US Forces-Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General Stanley McChrystal. The now widely-publicised assessment found the overall situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating due to an expanding insurgency and a crisis in confidence among the Afghan people in their government and the coalition's ability to provide them with security. McChrystal's key recommendation is for an urgent change in strategy backed up with additional forces to protect the population from insurgents. Complicating the task for the coalition is the fallout from the deeply flawed Afghan presidential election that will now be settled by a second round of voting on November 7 as the northern winter sets in. This paper examines a coalition COIN strategy in a state of flux and discusses possible implications for Australia's military and civilian commitment in Afghanistan.

A fork in the road

President Obama hasn't yet made up his mind on how to come to grips with the Taliban-dominated insurgency that is engulfing Afghanistan and destabilising Pakistan. This is despite earlier in the year setting out a comprehensive civil-military strategy for the region (the so-called 'AfPak' strategy) and promising to properly resource what he termed a 'war of necessity' to prevent al-Qaeda and associated movements from regaining their safe havens in Afghanistan. Obama approved the deployment to Afghanistan of 17,000 additional combat personnel and a further 4,000 soldiers to build the capacity of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). He sent these forces to Afghanistan without having the time to come up with a strategy of how they, or any subsequent reinforcements, should be employed.

Vice President Joe Biden, among other senior administration officials, is reportedly pushing for a limited counter-terrorism battle, using mainly special forces and unmanned air strikes against terrorist targets. This scaled-back approach cites self-interest in defeating the strategic threat to the United States posed by al-Qaeda and would have Afghanistan follow its own destiny. At the same time, a strong base of Congressional Democrats

want a ceiling on the 68,000 US troops already committed to the fight in order to limit the war's impact on Obama's domestic political agenda.

The Commander-in-Chief has come to a fork in the road: he can embrace a narrow approach, or commit to a troop-intensive COIN strategy advanced by his military advisers—Admiral Mike Mullen and Generals David Petraeus and McChrystal—and assign up to 40,000 extra troops they have supposedly asked for. If Obama were to reject the latter he may risk a serious breach with the military, which is the last thing he would want so early in his presidency. Indeed COIN, which until recently was only discussed in the US military by a few 'unorthodox' Army officers and academic experts, has now become the mantra of American combat units.

The 'classic' COIN strategy outlined in McChrystal's assessment comprehensively rejects a narrow focus on counter-terrorism. And with good reason: a light footprint approach has in effect been pursued in Afghanistan since October 2001 and has left the Taliban holding sway over half the country. McChrystal acknowledges that the population-centric COIN approach he advocates will result in more casualties in the short term among ISAF and the ANSF as they move into contested areas. He admits that there'll be hard fighting before the coalition has the upper hand. Nevertheless, his assessment makes a compelling case that a population-centric COIN strategy is the most viable option available for President Obama to rescue a failing war effort in the long run.

McChrystal's COIN strategy has four pillars: first, integrate and partner with the ANSF to enable a more rapid expansion of their capacity and responsibility for security; second, support responsive and accountable governance; third, gain the initiative and reverse the momentum of the insurgency; and fourth, deploy resources to critical areas where the population is threatened. Significantly, McChrystal points out that without proper resourcing this strategy will be unachievable. The campaign in Afghanistan thus far has been under-resourced and remains so today. The Iraq war provides a recent reminder that it's crucial to locate security forces within population centres to gain the confidence of communities experiencing high levels of sectarian violence. McChrystal understands that in Afghanistan there is a crisis of confidence among the people which arises from a weakness in institutions, wholesale corruption, a sense of political disenfranchisement and a lack of economic opportunity.

The August 20 Afghan presidential election was an unmitigated disaster that may have fatally damaged the government's already diminished legitimacy. The massive electoral fraud perpetrated by President Hamid Karzai's supporters with the acquiescence of Afghan officials, undermines the coalition strategy which places primacy on fostering the development of effective and legitimate governance as an alternative to the Taliban. President Obama would be right to question whether any COIN approach can be feasible in these circumstances. As a result of the crisis the White House will postpone any decision on sending more troops to Afghanistan until the disputed election has been settled and results in a partner in Kabul that the United States can work with.

Political legitimacy may be salvaged in a run-off between Karzai and his nearest rival, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, in a process that is seen to be free and fair and is protected from insurgent intimidation and violence. Following an investigation into the fraudulent ballots, the UN-appointed Electoral Complaints Commission in Afghanistan has reduced Karzai's vote-tally to less than 50% thereby enabling a second round election that is scheduled for 7 November 2009.

Another option for regaining the trust of Afghan people is a government of national unity that can serve as an interim administration until credible elections can be held in a more secure environment. In either case, Obama will have to commit extra troops to protect the population who are the decisive terrain in a conflict he has made a strategic priority. That is the only effective way of creating the conditions that will permit an elected Afghan government to secure its territory and allow coalition forces to return home within a reasonable timeframe.

The McChrystal–Eikenberry plan

Whereas much of the public debate has focused around the fallout from the McChrystal assessment, very little attention has been paid to the United States Government Integrated Civilian–Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan (McChrystal–Eikenberry Plan). This document provides guidance from the Commander of US Forces-Afghanistan and the US Chief of Mission, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, to all US personnel, and is based on close collaboration with ISAF, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Afghan Government.

The McChrystal–Eikenberry Plan aligns civilian and military efforts to protect the population from insurgents and create space for communities to connect with their government and access legitimate economic activity. Shifting the focus to deliver results to the population requires comprehensive integration and synchronisation of civil-military teams working in 11 areas of COIN ‘transformative effects’ (see box on next page) that cut across the security, development, governance and information lines of operation.

These effects will enable tangible progress in fighting the insurgency and building stability at the community, provincial and national levels. The coalition must concentrate on the sub-national level where insurgents focus their attention—the absence of a credible government presence at the local and district level has long been a destabilising factor that is exploited by the Taliban. In the coming year the greatest effort will be applied at the seat of the insurgency in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, followed by insurgent-dominated provinces in eastern Afghanistan. Securing the most unstable provinces first will have a ‘cascading effect’ on the rest of the country.

So what does this mean for us?

In Afghanistan we are a strategy-taker rather than strategy-maker. In the wake of the policy debate in the United States, it is prudent for the Australian Government to also re-evaluate its commitment. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has recently vowed to stay the course in Afghanistan, ruling out a premature withdrawal of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This leaves three broad options for a continuing Australian military presence in Afghanistan: first, no change in our current selective contribution of around 1,550 personnel who are mostly supporting a Netherlands Task Force in Oruzgan Province; second, an increased effort to build the ANSF in addition to ongoing war-fighting and reconstruction activity in Oruzgan; and third, taking primary responsibility for the security of Oruzgan from the Dutch who are set to relinquish this role. But if ISAF does adopt a population-centric COIN approach, we must ask whether the ADF will have the minimum force density required to establish population security in Oruzgan when our Dutch partners withdraw their military forces from Afghanistan in August 2010.

11 Counter-Insurgency Transformative Effects

- **Population Security**

Afghans feel free from violence and coercion by insurgents, criminals and terrorists, and increasingly trust security forces to protect them, enabling resistance to the insurgency and support for the government.

- **Claiming the Information Initiative**

Government and community leadership communicate with the Afghan people on a common vision of hope and progress that convinces Afghans to resist insurgent influence and reject violent extremism.

- **Access to Justice**

Afghan access to fair, efficient, and transparent justice in both state and traditional justice mechanisms is increased and Taliban influence on the informal system is reduced.

- **Expansion of Accountable and Transparent Governance**

Increasingly responsive, capable, and accountable governance at all levels competently serves the people, reinforcing a growing sense of connection and legitimacy.

- **Elections and Continuity of Governance**

Elections are credible, inclusive, and secure with minimal disruption, enabling a smooth post-election process.

- **Creating Sustainable Jobs for Population Centres and Corridors**

Licit small and medium enterprises create jobs and grow incomes in population centres and corridors, while improvements in the business enabling environment encourage large-scale investment in strategic sectors and extend opportunities to rural areas.

- **Agricultural Opportunity and Market Access**

Viable agriculture related employment and market development provide licit alternatives to narcotics and insurgent related activities and connect people to their government.

- **Action Against Irreconcilables**

Irreconcilable insurgent leaders and networks are defeated. They are rejected by the Afghan population and cannot threaten the security of Afghanistan or legitimacy of the Afghan Government. Al-Qaeda is unable to use Afghanistan to launch international terror attacks.

- **Countering the Nexus of Insurgency, Narcotics, Corruption and Criminality**

Key nodes within the nexus of criminals, narcotics, illicit finance and corrupt government officials which feed into the insurgency are identified, targeted and disrupted, significantly raising the costs and risks of this network.

- **Community and Government-led Reintegration**

Mid-to-low level insurgents are re-integrated into Afghan society, reducing the strength of the insurgency.

- **Insurgents**

Afghanistan works with regional partners to increase licit cross-border commerce and activities and reduce infiltration of insurgents and illicit goods.

Source: adapted from *United States Government Integrated Civilian–Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan* (August 10, 2009).

The Australian Government has indicated it is not in a position to take over the role of provincial lead nation in Oruzgan. However, if Australia were to assume this responsibility following a request from the United States it could only be for a very limited duration, rather than the decade-plus commitments demanded by earlier successful COIN campaigns such as the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960). The ADF would need to deploy a brigade-sized task force comprising at least 3,500 troops on year-long rotations. Force preparedness goals in the 2009 Defence White Paper, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, state that a brigade group deployed outside our primary operational area would only be sustained for short periods. There are practical limitations to how many rotations the ADF could sustain. Adding to the challenge, the ADF still lacks some of the key enablers currently provided by our coalition partners to undertake operations in an environment as complex as southern Afghanistan. These include troop-lift helicopters with electronic warfare self protection, surveillance platforms and fire support systems.

Moreover, taking sole responsibility for securing Oruzgan would leave the ADF without sufficient forces to fulfill its current mission in Afghanistan of security transition by helping field the Oruzgan-based 4th Brigade of the Afghan National Army's 205th Corps. Building the capacity of the 4th Brigade is a combined activity that is now undertaken by two ADF Operational Mentor and Liaison teams (OMLTs) in conjunction with Dutch, French and American training elements. The Minister for Defence, Senator John Faulkner, has sought advice from the military on how to complete this objective in the earliest possible time frame; a task previously determined by Chief of Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, to take from 3 to 5 years.

Committing an entire Australian infantry battalion (600 soldiers) to training and mentoring all six of the 4th Brigade's constituent *kandaks* (battalion equivalents) would enable this task to be completed expeditiously and with acceptable risk. A greater number of dedicated OMLT personnel would assist these units to attain desired capability milestones at a faster rate. It would also help ensure the 4th Brigade is delivered as a better coordinated formation that has been exposed to only one set of techniques, training and procedures, rather than four differing national approaches.

Not with bombs and bullets alone

Any increased military deployment would need to be matched by a boost in our previously neglected civilian capability in Afghanistan. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, has stated the Australian Government is open to considering a further civilian capacity building contribution. What is required according to Obama's 27 March 2009 strategy statement is a 'dramatic increase' in agricultural specialists, educators, engineers and lawyers, together with other civilian experts, to build a capacity to advance governance and provide justice and opportunity for the Afghan people.

As a first step to increasing our civilian effort the Rudd government should establish a properly-staffed embassy in Kabul. A lack of adequate consular facilities has severely limited the contribution that Australian Government agencies can make in Afghanistan. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) officers have worked out of makeshift premises in the US Embassy compound in Kabul following the January 2008 insurgent attack on the up-market Serena Hotel that had previously housed the Australian Embassy. Nevertheless, some recent progress has been made in addressing this unsatisfactory situation.

As the largest non-NATO contributor of troops to the 43 member ISAF mission, and the ninth largest overall, Australia could seek representation on the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB). The JCMB is comprised of senior Afghan Government officials, foreign diplomats and coalition military officers. It is the paramount body responsible for overseeing the Afghan National Development Strategy: the comprehensive five-year plan for reconstruction and development that was established by the 2006 London Conference on Afghanistan. Representation on the JCMB would give Australia greater influence on the course of development and capacity building in Afghanistan should the government seek this.

Australia's overseas development assistance to Afghanistan has totalled \$650 million since 2001. The aid money is managed by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and delivered primarily through multilateral mechanisms and international non-government organisations. However, only a small fraction of AusAID's managed funds are disbursed in Oruzgan—the focus of our national efforts.

AusAID has recently increased the size of its civilian capacity building footprint in Oruzgan, which for much of the last two years has been limited to only one development adviser. What we require is comprehensive interagency participation and cooperation along the lines of the McChrystal–Eikenberry plan if we are to transfer to Afghan authorities the responsibility for security, governance and service delivery in Oruzgan.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has twenty-two personnel deployed in a number of locations in Afghanistan. The Australian Government has recently based a team from the AFP International Deployment Group in Oruzgan Province, where they work alongside the ADF to train local security forces. There remains enormous scope for the AFP to enhance the capacity of the Afghan National Police in all areas of policing.

In addition to sending more AFP, DFAT and AusAID personnel to Afghanistan, the government should also investigate the idea of employing a corps of civilian volunteers with appropriate skills to help with the governance and development lines of operation. This capability could be based on the '2020 Summit' initiative of a deployable civilian capacity to assist in international disaster relief, stabilisation and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, that is currently being developed by an AusAID-led interagency taskforce.

Australia, as a country with considerable expertise in dry land agriculture, can provide agricultural specialists to assist Afghan farmers in opium-growing districts transition to a licit agri-based economy to counter the nexus of narcotics, corruption, insurgency and criminality. However, sending civilians into the area of operations must be balanced against a duty of care by government—the Taliban deliberately seek out foreign aid workers who are regarded as soft targets. Nevertheless, Australian civilian volunteers can be sent to more secure areas of the country until security improves in insurgent-affected southern Afghanistan.

Conclusion

If President Obama takes the advice of his generals, Prime Minister Rudd will have to make a difficult decision: whether to meet the requirements of a more demanding strategy in Afghanistan and accept the cost in blood and treasure that would entail, or leave it to our coalition partners to shoulder the additional burden. Options are to maintain or increase selective contributions to an expanded strategy, or to step-up Australia's contribution very significantly and take responsibility for Oruzgan Province. Adopting a population-centric COIN approach as the way forward, however, would require a holistic program of civil-military cooperation if we are to make a tangible difference in improving security and strengthening governance in our limited area of operations.

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