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Afghanistan: now you see me?: introduction - addressing Afghanistan

Report

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Introduction - Addressing Afghanistan

With a sustained drawdown of troops from Iraq Afghanistan has become the focus of the West's military engagements in the region. The initially well-supported response to the attacks of September 11th had lain neglected in the shadow of America's ideological adventurism in the Middle East; and in the vacuum of political, military and economic commitment the overthrown Taliban have been resuscitated. But is the West's renewed interest in Afghanistan too little, too late?



The Iraq pause has at least engendered a rethinking of international attitudes towards Afghanistan, the primary result of which has been the recognition that 'victory' may mean compromise. Afghanistan has been at war for at least 30 years, and its disasters have arisen from other people's conflicts. From the perspective of the Afghan people their country has been wrecked by forces that have had little to do with them, and it is for that reason that the only solution that is likely to endure for Afghanistan is one that comes from Afghanistan itself – enabled perhaps, by emphatically not imposed by outsiders.

The international community should therefore be thinking in terms of small compromises to forge a number of local settlements rather than attempting, by themselves, to resolve big issues on a national scale – the time for those will come. Local compromises will need to be more than solely military ceasefires established with insurgent groups – they will also need to be settlements in terms of the economy, in terms of social values, and in terms of access to the resources of the state.

The development of such compromises will be difficult and lengthy given the complex and fragmented nature of the Afghan situation compared to, say, Iraq. Whilst the Taliban may be resurgent, they are but one of a plethora of groups and important local 'strongmen' that the Afghan government and its international partners need to begin a dialogue with, and that fact creates great complexity to the negotiations, but also the potential for negotiating a series of small compromises that will amount to a more satisfactory overall solution for the West than if it focused solely on discussions with Mullah Omar. One could envision a situation where Afghanistan's governance at the local level is undertaken by a whole series of groups, each backed by its own compromise agreement. Finding the internal balance in Afghanistan that will allow this kind of imperfect and messy settlement to come about will not be easy, but it is now almost certainly the best solution for the country and for its relationship with the outside world.

The basic fact is that even with a military surge the chances of Afghanistan conducting a nationwide free and fair election anytime soon are remote. Whilst the election campaigns that have been going on have contributed to drawing people into some kind of political process, but in the long run national elections may have many advantages, but they will not necessarily generate stability. The West needs to think about Afghanistan's society in terms of smaller units - ethnic groups; local areas;



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clans; even villages – rather than generating policy for a national level that is not really subscribed to, and that is too remote to solve those local issues.

A policy rethink is already underway. The United States has pledged to put more troops on the ground, something which will help, but only if more attempts are made to draw even the most violent groups into talks. Indeed, without a political surge more troops could after some time actually be counterproductive, creating new targets rather than increased security. There can be no purely military solution for a country that has got used to perpetual war, no matter how much manpower and hardware the United States and its international partners are prepared to put on the ground.

In this Strategic Update we look at Afghanistan in terms of the major issues around which local compromises will focus. **Jamie Shea** discusses the difficulties of retaining the support of NATO governments and publics for the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan unless there is what he calls a 'comprehensive approach' among the international actors which has a renewed commitment to a realistic counter-insurgency strategy at its heart.

Antonio Giustozzi reflects on the growth of the neo-Taliban and associated insurgent groups. He highlights that their disparate strategies and in particular the difficulties in establishing Mullah Omar's goals makes the path of negotiations a profoundly uncertain one.

Fabrice Pothier paints a picture of the sheer scale of the opium problem in Afghanistan and argues for a decoupling of the counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics operations as the first step towards creating the conditions under which the problem can be comprehensively addressed and negotiated settlements can proceed.

Amalendu Misra explores the regional dimension to the Afghan problem, and suggests that the current variant of India and Pakistan's deeply historical geostrategic competition for Afghanistan threatens both Afghanistan's security and development. At the same time, Iran could emerge as a relatively stable partner that might play a constructive role in compromise agreements.

Afghanistan - Key Facts

Geography:

Area: 647,500 km² (about the size of Texas)

Population: 32,738,376

Population Density: 46/km²

Economy:

GDP (PPP): \$20.099 billion

per capita: \$733

Labour Force: 15 Million

by occupation: agriculture: 80%

industry: 10%

services: 10%

Unemployment: 40%

Budget: revenues: \$715 million

expenditures: \$2.6 billion

Inflation rate: 13% (2007 est.)

Demographics:

Birth Rate: 45.82/1,000 population

Death Rate: 19.56/1,000 population

Pop'n growth: 2.626%

Fertility Rate: 6.58 children born/woman

Infant Mortality: 155 deaths/1,000 live births

Life expectancy: 44.21 years

Society:

Religion: Sunni Muslim 80%, Shia

Muslim 19%, other 1%

Literacy: male: 43.1%

female: 12.6%

Ethnicity:

Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%,

Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%,

Aimak 4%, Turkmen 3%,

Baloch 2%, other 4%

Source: CIA World Factbook (2008 unless stated)