

10. Conclusion

It is not possible now to chart an exact course for the future. Despite one's best hopes, the war may continue unabated. A Taliban victory, with black turbaned fighters triumphantly riding their pickup trucks into Kabul, is highly unlikely and nearly impossible unless the West abandons the Afghan regime. Allied success, however, may take many paths. Security assistance may move to the forefront of the allied agenda, allowing for the withdrawal of some or all of ISAF's combat forces. Reintegration of individuals and reconciliation with part or all of the Taliban may occur much faster than the Western powers expect. Afghanistan's history is replete with examples where entire armed factions change sides in recognition of new realities. Regional actors such as Pakistan or even Iran may play more constructive roles in reaching settlements or otherwise fashioning a better peace.

While major outcomes are uncertain, there are a number of key issues that the U.S. leadership team needs to tackle right away. First, on the military end, it will be necessary to keep up the pressure on the Taliban. Protecting the population should remain the first priority, but one of the best ways to do that is to eliminate the Taliban, whose forces oppress the population the coalition seeks to safeguard. If reconciliation advances, there will be many, including some in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who will want to cut back on offensive operations and counterterrorist activities against the Taliban and al Qaeda. In truth, reconciliation in the long run depends on destroying Taliban formations, fracturing the Taliban alliance, and convincing many of its constituent commanders that reconciliation is a better path.

Secondly, it is clear that there needs to be a high level of civil-military teamwork throughout the U.S. leadership in country, both in

the capital and in the field. Iraq and Afghanistan are proof positive that personal chemistry can remove obstacles to cooperation but that the chemistry is not always there. You cannot legislate or direct such chemistry, but clarifying intracommand relationships may help. The civilian surge is working. With over 1,000 U.S. Government civilians in country, there is now integration of politico-military efforts at the brigade, regional, district-province, and national levels.¹ Civil and military leaders at the regional command and brigade levels may well be ahead of their Washington and Kabul-based superiors in forging adaptive whole-of-government approaches to problems in Afghanistan. Ambassadors Ryan Crocker and Marc Grossman will have their work cut out for them.

Third, the coalition needs to work not harder but smarter on the narcotics problem.² Profits or “taxes” from the narcotics trade fund the Taliban and corrupt government officials. Addiction and drug use are a growing problem in the region, even in the Afghan National Security Forces. ISAF should continue to increase its efforts, not against farmers but drug lords, warehouses, and laboratories. When the drug lord infrastructure is gone, eradication will become easier and crop substitution will have a real chance.³

Fourth, the United States should develop a regional strategy for South Asia that in the long run restores appropriate priorities. T.X. Hammes and former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley, both distinguished National Defense University scholars, have reminded us of an opportunity cost of the current war in Afghanistan that few have mentioned:

The focus on the war in Afghanistan has prevented the United States from developing a South Asia strategy rooted in the relative strategic importance of the nations in the region. India, a

stable democracy enjoying rapid growth, clearly has the most potential as a strategic partner. Pakistan, as the home of al Qaeda leadership and over 60 nuclear weapons, is the greatest threat to regional stability and growth. Yet Afghanistan absorbs the vast majority of U.S. effort in the region. The United States needs to develop a genuine regional strategy.⁴

The authors recommend greater attention to political reform and economic development in Pakistan, as well as increased attention to building trust between New Delhi and Islamabad. Long-term postconflict relationships in South and Southwest Asia must be a priority for our diplomats and strategic planners. Peace between India and Pakistan is as important for the United States as peace between Israel and its neighbors. Solving the conflict in Afghanistan could be a first link in a chain of peace in the region.

Finally, the United States, its allies, and the international financial institutions need to focus on building Afghan capacity, not just in the short term in the national security ministries, but across the board in the civil government and private sectors. Training and advising Afghan security forces are important immediate steps, but we must think in terms of decades about how to help Afghanistan help itself overcome the effects of 33 years of war. The West must reinforce training and advisory efforts that help the Afghan government improve governance, rule of law, and basic enterprise management. U.S. educational institutions should be encouraged to reach out to Afghan colleges and graduate schools to help modernize them. While working more closely with province and district governments is important, it is also true that there will be no end to the problems of Afghanistan unless there is a functioning government in

Kabul that is linked into the provinces and districts and able to perform the basic security and welfare functions of a state. A modicum of nation-building in Afghanistan is in the interest of the United States and its coalition partners. Even more important is to build Afghan capacity to develop Afghanistan. In that regard, the new NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan program for literacy training for Afghan enlisted soldiers may be a model for others engaged in building capacity in nonmilitary sectors. Along with capacity-building, harnessing and empowering local communities will be imperative. People-powered programs, such as the National Solidarity Program, are key to good governance and local development.

The United States has for a decade argued in its advisory and development activities that “teaching people how to fish is better than giving them fish.” The truth of the matter is, however, that the United States is superb at providing fish and not very good at teaching people how to fish, which in this case means building capacity and mentoring. As we work on building national security and local defense forces, we need to redouble our efforts at building up Afghan human capital and the institutions of governance that one day will enable the state to stand on its own two feet as a decent and effective government. If this does not come to pass, the United States and its allies will ultimately fail in Afghanistan.⁵