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On Rocky Ground
Cautious Progress in Afghanistan
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The U.S. military's continuing presence in Afghanistan—now more than three years old—has largely faded from the media spotlight. Although the hunt for Osama Bin Laden was a major topic of discussion during the presidential debates, the future of Afghanistan and its relationship with the United States have received little mention in recent months. But even though the war in Iraq has taken center stage, it should not be forgotten that the U.S. military remains central to the stability of the Afghan state. Despite the recent wave of criticism concerning U.S. military behavior abroad, American troops in Afghanistan have been invaluable to achieving stability within that country and in helping the government of Hamid Karzai hold together at a national level. Nevertheless, tensions continue to exist among factions of the national government and between the central government and regional leaders. Moreover, an insurgency by Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other Islamic militants persists. To make matters worse, narcotics trafficking is a growing threat to Afghan stability since it helps finance warlords and guerilla groups. Clearly, many problems remain to be solved. But as the U.S. continues its efforts to establish a stable and democratic system of governance in this war-torn country, it becomes ever more important to analyze the obstacles U.S. troops have encountered in Afghanistan and the role they can continue to play there.

The three biggest challenges facing the American armed forces in Afghanistan now involve a difficult relationship with regional powers whose loyalties are conflicted; a burgeoning opium trade; and finally, the historic tendency of the outlying regions of the country to oppose the central government.

FRIENDS AND FOES

Because Afghanistan has long been at the crossroads of Middle Eastern and Central Asian history, it was necessary that the U.S. military seek the aid of bordering countries in its effort to stabilize Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Some of those cooperating however, such as Pakistan, may be hurting more than they are helping.

Pakistan is nominally an ally of the United States, but their attitude towards U.S. operations in Afghanistan has seemed rather ambivalent. The U.S. believes Bin Laden and his associates to be hiding in Pakistan in a region just across the border from Afghanistan. Although Pakistan has provided 70,000 troops to search for Al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents in this area, it is widely suspected that factions within Pakistan's government and military are financing the very insurgency Islamabad purports to fight. Pakistan has historically been very sympathetic towards people of Pashtun ethnicity, who dominated the Taliban. Allegedly, Pakistan was delivering supplies to Taliban forces in Jalalabad as late as October 2001. Just last year, Muhammad Sohail, a 17 year-old member of the terrorist group Jamiat-al-Ansur, was captured by the Afghan government. Sohail said that he was recruited in Pakistan along with many others—with wide support from the Pakistani establishment—and sent to attack American and Afghan

forces in Kabul. A high-ranking Taliban leader who was also detained in 2004 revealed that his comrades had conducted much of their war planning in Quetta, Pakistan, which has become the base of many militant Afghan exiles and those deposed along with the Taliban regime.

The U.S. military is limited in its ability to root out its most wanted men within the borders of Pakistan, since Pakistan does not officially allow the U.S. military to set foot on its soil. According to January 15 issue of *The Economist*, “nothing irks America’s men in Afghanistan more than their enemy’s propensity to flee into Pakistan, there to rest and re-arm, seemingly at will.” It is undeniable that Pakistan faces a difficult situation: on one hand, the government fears that Taliban influence will galvanize radical Islamic elements within its own borders; on the other, it has been forced to deny that it allowed the U.S. to set up intelligence bases in its Waziristan region to search for Bin Laden, because the U.S. military presence evokes widespread resentment within the country. Understanding this dichotomy does nothing to make the U.S. military’s job easier.

Iran has also attempted to influence how U.S. troops are deployed in Afghanistan, particularly in the western region of the country. The Iranian regime has a history of providing military assistance to the Northern Alliance, which assisted the U.S. in opposing the Taliban during the first days of its involvement in Afghanistan. But, like Pakistan, it is also nervous about U.S. military bases along its border. Also like Islamabad, Tehran is criticized by the U.S. government for failing to arrest Al Qaeda agents who cross over the Afghan border into their country. Iran has not been decisive in cooperating with the U.S. because, though there are dangers inherent in harboring terrorists, collusion risks alienating Iran’s own people and regional allies.

WAR ON TERROR, WAR ON DRUGS

Internal pressures are adding to the U.S.’s already difficult task in Afghanistan. One of its most pressing challenges within the country is the illegal growth of opium. Until now, it has not been the U.S.’s job to enforce Karzai’s 2002 ban on opium crops. However, due to the increasing attacks on U.S. forces by opium traders as well as the direct link between the trade and the financing of Taliban and Al-Qaeda insurgents, U.S. strategy is shifting towards cutting off the Afghan drug trade. The military must often work in tandem with government measures which offer Afghans alternative crops to the poppy. Many Afghans grow opium because it offers the only chance of a livelihood—it is cheap and brings in a large profit—and will continue to grow it unless they find a suitable replacement.

Ironically, the overthrow of the Taliban largely contributed to the expansion of the opium trade (and, by extension, increased the income of the United States’ enemies in the war on terror). The Taliban were effective at banning opium. But since their downfall in 2001, production has quadrupled. Yale History Professor Mary Habeck told *The Yale Globalist* that the Taliban executed many of those who violated the opium ban. But with the recent rise in opium trade, officials fear that local leaders hostile to the central government will be financed by the illegal opium trade in the spring’s parliamentary elections. With the umbrella of the Taliban gone, local factions and warlords are independent once again and have thus turned to independent sources of money. If they hope for their democratic initiatives to succeed, the Karzai government and the Bush administration now have a direct stake in the cessation of drug trafficking.

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

Drugs, however, are only part of the problem. Tackling local factionalism is the key challenge for the U.S. military operation in its quest to secure the central Afghan government. The problem lies partly in the central government's composition, one which reflects neither the ethnic make-up nor the religiosity of outlying areas. Amy Hamelin, an Afghanistan coordinator for the National Democratic Institute, says that "unlike in Iraq, there are...no ethnic or religious groups that [were] likely to boycott the elections, with the exception of staunch Taliban supporters, many of whom are ethnic Pashtuns from the south. Voter registration and voting numbers were lower in the southern provinces, where the Taliban had its stronghold. That said, Karzai is a Pashtun and Pashtuns throughout the country generally voted in large numbers."

Many regional leaders are aligning themselves with those who have been disenfranchised by the creation of the Karzai government, such as fundamentalist Muslims and Pashtuns. Even Karzai acknowledged in a speech following his November election that local factions and militias are the largest challenge to central government. These political divides are increasingly influencing U.S. military strategy. In order to make the center politically viable, the periphery must be secure.

Regional sensitivity marks a break with prior U.S. strategy, which, according to the most recent Congressional report on Afghanistan, had been to "strengthen the central government so that it can more easily displace and curb regional leaders." Now, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)'s main objective is to protect the Afghan government and the reconstruction workers in the outlying regions. Hamelin notes that "aid and NGO workers are indeed vulnerable, especially those who work for smaller operations." However, according to Hamelin "it is important to note that the security situation has improved greatly with the presence of both the U.S. coalition forces and NATO [International Security Assistance Force] troops. The threat to aid workers comes not only from remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but also from more ordinary banditry and lawlessness in the more remote corners of this vast, rugged country." The strategy of targeting these areas is becoming more tangible as the U.S. works with local leaders to hunt down Bin Laden. Many believe that he will be brought in, not as a result of a military investigation, but by a town elder pointing soldiers in the right direction.

The U.S. is sending troops into populated areas in order to cultivate relations for counter-insurgency operations. But this is complicated by fact that U.S. troops are not taking on traditional peace-keeping roles. Such roles belong to NATO's forces. Staffed by troops from all 26 NATO members, ISAF often suffers from shortages of personnel and equipment. Limited to a handful of major Afghan cities, they have hardly succeeded in stabilizing the country as a whole.

American soldiers seeking Bin Laden have also encountered problems with traditional Afghan hospitality. It is contrary to the tribal Afghan honor code to betray the U.S. troops they are hosting in their towns, but equally reprehensible to betray a terrorist who has sought refuge. Depending on local assistance to reveal the whereabouts of the world's most sought-after fugitives may not be the most effective strategy. Nor is this tactic likely to bring dissenting regions into the national fold unless peace can be effectively maintained through other means.

The U.S. military cannot rely on the Northern Alliance to unite the deeply divided country. Virtually leaderless since its charismatic chief, Ahmed Shah Masood, was assassinated by Al-Qaeda two days before 9/11, the Alliance provided the local face of the U.S. military's attacks in the initial days of the October 2001 campaign. However, Alliance forces disobeyed U.S. instructions not to enter Kabul directly

when they were assisting in the overthrow of the Taliban. They remain fiercely independent in the localities they control and are resentful of the central government.

Primarily composed of Tajiks, the Northern Alliance also presents an obstacle to creation of an Afghan National Army (ANA). The force, which is called a “national symbol” by U.S. officials, currently has about 16,000 troops trained by the U.S., Britain, and France. But rumors have lately emerged that the Northern Alliance officers in charge of recruitment for the ANA were inclined to favor their own Tajik ethnic group. This has caused widespread protest among Karzai’s fellow Pashtuns. Even more, it has inspired many potential recruits to refuse joining the ANA and other Pashtuns soldiers to desert. It is not an auspicious beginning for the new Afghan army.

The U.S. military is severely limited in its ability to prevent foreign actors from destabilizing Afghanistan, owing in part to a lack of both regional expertise and funding, which, given the ever-mounting cost of the war in Iraq, is becoming increasingly scarce. The military has also been slow to react to the opium problem, exacerbating the poor security situation. It failed to adequately cope with pre-existing Afghan social tensions and regional heavyweights whose loyalties are ambiguous. Despite these challenges, Habeck points out that Afghanistan has seen significant improvements since 2001. A tyrannical regime has been successfully overthrown, and in its place, Afghans have successfully elected a central government. Karzai has, for the time being, succeeded in pacifying the local warlords. Perhaps the biggest advance is that, after international urging, Pakistan is making a serious effort to crack down on insurgents operating within its territory. Habeck notes that “Bush has convinced Musharraf to crack down on Taliban on his side of the border.” While Iraq may remain the principal headline-grabber, perhaps Afghanistan and the U.S. troops stationed there are part of a tentative success – as Habeck says, “Kandahar isn’t Fallujah.” No foreign army has ever succeeded in leaving Afghanistan better than it found it. If the U.S. can address some of the country’s critical difficulties, they may be able to change that.

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