Cato Handbook for Policymakers

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51. U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan

Policymakers should

- make the war in Afghanistan a top priority, as Washington's insufficient military focus has led directly to the Taliban's resurgence in that country's eastern and southern provinces;
- plan for drawing the military mission in Afghanistan to a close, including the withdrawal of most U.S. military personnel within a two- to three-year period;
- develop a comprehensive plan to uproot al Qaeda, Taliban, and other militant safe havens in the tribal belt of western Pakistan, an area used by insurgents to infiltrate neighboring Afghanistan and sabotage U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization operations;
- recognize that large-scale military action in Pakistan's tribal areas will further radicalize the region's indigenous population and should be deemphasized in favor of low-level clear-and-hold operations, which employ small numbers of U.S. Special Operations Forces and Pakistan's Special Services Group; and
- maintain tighter oversight on the distribution of military aid and the sale of dual-use weapons systems to Pakistan, especially those that have limited utility for counterterrorism operations but instead feed Pakistan's rivalry with India.

Focus on Afghanistan

Shortly after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, President George W. Bush decided to pull most of America's Special Operations Forces and Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary operatives off the hunt for Osama bin Laden so they could be reconstituted for war in Iraq. Over the years,

the scope of America's commitment in that country took Washington's attention away from the ''forgotten war'' in Afghanistan. But by summer 2008, the situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated badly.

In June, the deadliest month since the 2001 invasion, a sophisticated Taliban assault on a Kandahar prison freed 1,200 inmates, including 350 Taliban members. Violence in Afghanistan rose 40 percent from the previous year. Ambushes, suicide attacks, and targeted assassinations rose sharply. The Taliban's presence is strongest in the Helmand, Kandahar, Zabol, and Oruzgan provinces in southern Afghanistan, and is either significant or conspicuous in the Paktika, Khowst, Nangarhar, Konar, and Nuristan provinces in eastern Afghanistan. In many of these areas, the Taliban have usurped the traditional functions of a sovereign state, collecting taxes, maintaining order, and providing basic services.

Lessons to Learn

Some U.S. policymakers believe that the war in Afghanistan requires a ''surge'' of conventional forces similar to that conducted in Iraq in 2007. In 2008, both major party presidential candidates advocated sending two to three additional combat brigades—as many as 15,000 additional troops—to augment the 32,000 U.S. troops already in Afghanistan as part of NATO's 60,000-strong International Security Assistance Force.

But U.S. policymakers should be cautious about deploying more troops to the region. The experience of the Soviet Union's 10-year occupation of Afghanistan should demonstrate to leaders in Washington how easily a modern army can become bogged down in a bloody, frustrating, and protracted guerrilla war.

The anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s in Afghanistan did not bring about the dissolution of the Soviet system, as some analysts now claim. But the decade-long struggle, once labeled by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev as ''a bleeding wound,'' did thoroughly demoralize the USSR.

There are clear differences between what Western coalition forces face today and what the Soviet Union endured during the cold war. First, at least according to open-source information, modern-day militants are not being backed by millions of dollars in covert aid from an opposing superpower. A second critical distinction is that Soviet forces in the early 1980s were not nearly as well equipped as U.S. and NATO forces are today. With force multipliers such as unmanned drones and helicopter gunships, International Security Assistance Force troops are ostensibly better pre-

pared to stabilize the region. But these sorts of technological advantages can go only so far.

The history of the region shows that Afghanistan's fiercely independent and battle-tested Pashtuns are extremely resilient in resisting conventional armies. Time and again, Persian, Greek, Turk, Mughal, British, and Soviet invaders have been unable to subdue a virtually unconquerable people. Like the Soviet Union's ignominious departure from the region, U.S. and NATO troops, despite their sophisticated gadgetry, could easily meet the same fate.

Aside from military operations, and the concomitant difficulty of distinguishing ordinary tribesmen from militant operatives, another reason U.S. leaders should be careful in sending more troops into Afghanistan is the taxing nature of nation-building. Stabilizing and rebuilding a country that lacks government authority and is notoriously resistant to outsiders will be an extensive and daunting undertaking. One central lesson to take away from previous invaders is to forge, first and foremost, a political settlement. But cultivating a political resolution will not be easy, and at least under the current Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, may prove nearly impossible.

Clausewitzian Answers

Legitimacy is the central component of good governance. But presently, the writ of President Karzai is confined largely to the capital, Kabul. Recently, several NATO countries have been highly critical of Karzai's weak leadership, as well as his seeming inability to stamp out government corruption.

One way for Karzai and future Afghan presidents to increase their credibility would be to integrate more of their country's ethnic Pashtuns. Durrani Pashtuns have been Afghanistan's traditional political elite. Karzai himself emerged from the Popalzai clan of the Durrani tribe. However, Ghilzai Pashtuns, unlike their Durrani counterparts, tend to be rural and less educated and were the main foot soldiers for the Taliban. Misgivings about the current government's perceived bias against Ghilzai Pashtuns were compounded shortly after the swift U.S. victory in late 2001, when American forces relied heavily on the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance to defeat the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. Those kinds of political and social problems cannot be solved simply by boosting U.S. troop levels.

Another reason why U.S. and NATO policymakers must be cautious in their approach toward Afghanistan is that its challenges extend across the border into Pakistan. As long as militants continue to infiltrate the

hundreds of unguarded checkpoints along the Afghan-Pakistani border, the security environment in Afghanistan will continue to decline.

Regional Safe Havens

Few places in the world are truly ungoverned. But Pakistan's western frontier with Afghanistan, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, is one such place.

A relic of the 19th century's imperial era, this thin slice of rugged territory was left unconquered by Britain's colonial armies and has been devoid of a governing structure for the past several centuries. After the partition of British India in 1947, the tribal agencies of FATA were absorbed by the independent state of Pakistan, yet remained formally outside the Pakistani constitution.

This vast unpoliced region is now a sanctuary for al Qaeda, the Taliban, and a smattering of other interconnected militant groups. FATA's highly porous border acts as a giant sieve, enabling militants to slip into and out of Afghanistan. Militants also use the area to attack trucks loaded with fuel and supplies for NATO operations in Afghanistan. The 2008 *Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence* reported that ''using the sanctuary in the border area of Pakistan, al-Qa'ida has been able to maintain a cadre of skilled lieutenants capable of directing the organization's operations around the world.''

Because the Pakistani government has never effectively controlled its autonomous tribal territories, in September 2008 U.S. forces in Afghanistan began to exercise greater latitude in the tribal region, through the escalation of unilateral strikes against militants and incursions onto Pakistani soil.

But like operations in Afghanistan, an overreliance on military force in the tribal areas could just as easily exacerbate regional terrorism. Moreover, military force alone cannot adequately address the political conditions that stimulate radicalism. Over the past several years, the original Afghan Taliban and an indigenous Pakistani version of the Taliban, known as Tehrik-e-Taliban, have operated in FATA and offered themselves as an alternative to the government in Islamabad. Because many Pakistanis, both inside and outside the tribal areas, perceive America's presence in the region to be a central source of regional instability, these groups and their allies are seen by some as a lesser threat.

Given the political, ethnic, and historical complexities of the region, any response from U.S. and NATO forces must be measured, deliberate, and, above all, precise. To confront the region's militancy, Washington

must place a greater emphasis on a limited number of Special Operations Forces and human-intelligence operatives, rather than on large-scale battalions and an overwhelming combat presence. A 200-page study by the RAND Corporation, released in July 2008, corroborates this point. In that study titled ''How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda,'' RAND scholars Seth Jones and Martin Libicki insist that overstated claims such as ''shattering'' al Qaeda, striking it ''major blows,'' and ensuring terrorists are ''on the run'' misunderstand the limits of military force. Paraphrasing counterinsurgency expert David Galula, the RAND study asserts:

> Military force is too blunt an instrument to defeat most terrorist groups. Military forces may be able to penetrate and garrison an area that terrorist groups frequent and, if well sustained, may temporarily reduce terrorist activity. But once the situation in an area becomes untenable for terrorists, they will simply transfer their activity to another area, and the problem remains unresolved.

The current struggle for Afghanistan and the borderland of Pakistan would be best waged through law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and as light a military footprint as possible.

Fortunately, the United States and Pakistan appear to be moving in that direction. During late summer 2008, a small number of U.S. Army and Special Operations Forces helped train Pakistan's Special Services Group, a highly specialized organization expected to perform limited ground and air operations in and around FATA. While this limited presence is less than ideal for a region as expansive as FATA, a heavier combat presence risks provoking a hostile response from the region's tribes.

Aside from the military dimension, stabilizing the tribal areas will also require a more effective use of current economic aid. In general, foreign aid tends to be detrimental to a poor country's internal development; it discourages accountability and deters needed domestic reforms. But Washington's motivation is to gain Islamabad's approval for its policies within the region. Because that assistance is a quid pro quo for advancing U.S. policies, stopping aid completely might shut a vital intelligence link needed to neutralize regional terrorism, as well as alienate a Muslim-majority country with a troubling history of nuclear proliferation activities. From counterterrorism to nuclear proliferation to human-intelligence sharing and transporting of supplies for NATO operations, continued cooperation with the Pakistani government is critical for advancing U.S. policies in the region. But the United States must better manage the

distribution of aid, which since 9/11 may have totaled nearly $20 billion according to one estimate by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Use of Current Funds

In fact, it is impossible to quantify the exact amount of U.S. aid given to Pakistan. When the Prevention, Conflict Analysis, and Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies asked nearly 100 former and current U.S. officials how much they thought the United States provided Pakistan annually, replies ranged from $800 million to $5 billion. The problem in fixing on a precise estimate is that the delivery of U.S. aid is highly decentralized within the U.S. government, with different agencies responsible for monitoring only those programs that fall within their respective budgets.

Another problem is that much of the aid evaporates due to widespread corruption and mismanagement in Pakistan. For an eight-month period in 2007, the United States reimbursed Pakistan $55 million for maintenance costs of Vietnam-era Cobra attack helicopters. Later, the United States discovered that Pakistan's army got less than half of that amount from the Pakistani government. That led some Washington lawmakers to believe Islamabad was exaggerating costs in order to acquire more reimbursements and pocket surplus funds. In fact, the Government Accountability Office found that of the over $10.5 billion in unclassified aid given to Pakistan from 2002 through 2007, $5.8 billion was allotted to FATA and the border region, and about 96 percent of that was delivered as reimbursements. For many years, the U.S. government has shoveled billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan without appropriate oversight. Until aid to Pakistan is more properly monitored, prospects for true improvement of the situation in the tribal areas seem dim.

Conclusion

Today, what is missing from the U.S. national security debate is a frank and serious discussion about the strategic consequences of a long-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Before committing even more troops to the conflict, policymakers in Washington must recognize that the United States does not have the resources, long-term political interest, or even the proper standing to deal with the entirety of Afghanistan's internal problems. If policymakers intend to rebuild that country from the bottom up, they

should prepare for a project that will take years—if not decades—and may not even achieve anything resembling true victory in Afghanistan.

U.S. policy should move in the opposite direction. With regard to Afghanistan, the short-term objective must be to weaken the Taliban and other militants intent on destabilizing the Afghan government. That will require a concerted military campaign and a political effort to wean tribal leaders from those extremist movements they are now inclined to support. The strategy the U.S. military belatedly used in Iraq's Anbar province to split Iraqi Sunnis from al Qaeda may offer some pertinent lessons.

Longer term, though, the United States must develop an exit strategy from Afghanistan. It is not in America's best interest to try to occupy the country for years, much less decades. Unfortunately, Washington seems to have drifted into a vague, open-ended mission. That situation must change.

A similar distinction between short-term and long-term strategy is also necessary regarding Pakistan. Over the next year or two, a greater effort must be made by both Islamabad and Washington to disrupt the Taliban and al Qaeda safe havens in FATA. Without success on that front, the U.S.-NATO mission next door in Afghanistan is likely to fail. However, Washington's longer-term goal needs to be a lower-profile role in Pakistan—not a highly visible military presence. Adopting such an approach means accepting the likelihood that the Taliban–al Qaeda threat centered in Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be definitively eradicated. U.S. leaders will have to pursue the more modest and realistic goal of merely weakening those movements and keeping them off balance. The alternative is to slog along with expensive, frustrating, and possibly counterproductive campaigns with no end in sight.

Suggested Readings

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