Missing Political Front in Afghanistan

By Clark Johnson
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Abstract. US efforts in Afghanistan since 2001, and especially since the surge of 2010-2011, have emphasized military and to a lesser extent donor aid operations, while side-stepping political and cultural complexities. The policy has failed, as evidenced by both persistence of the insurgency and by acknowledgement of Coalition leaders that they do not know how to reinforce credibility of GIRoA (Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan). Going back to 1989, and certainly since 2001, the US has failed to construct a coalition of moderates that might be able to enhance legitimacy and increase stability, and hence to begin to defuse military tensions. Indeed, the US has often supported factions that tended to undermine stability and energize insurgent activity. An improved political strategy going forward would look for ways to collaborate with and strengthen moderate tribal and religious leaders, and to support GIRoA structures already in-place for neutralizing extremists and warlords. In line with Afghan historical precedent, the US and Coalition should also seek to decentralize government finance and appointments, in order that some insurgents might choose to compete politically (non-militarily) in provinces and districts. This can be accomplished over time even without negotiations between GIRoA and Taliban leaders, and with a minimum of Coalition military support.

President Barack Obama’s decision to authorize military action on the part of US forces in Afghanistan after the end of 2014 reopens strategic questions often thought to have been closed. Despite the peaceful transition of power to Ashraf Ghani, who is perceived as a moderate reformer and internationally-minded, as President, the war is not going well. Reports indicate that Afghan Army and Police casualties in 2014 were the highest since the 2001 intervention, and civilian casualties, the majority of them inflicted by the insurgency, were the highest since the United Nations began reporting them in 2009.

In Iraq, a military “surge” in 2007 initially brought an upward spike in Coalition and Iraqi casualties, but it was followed by a decline that lasted for several years. In contrast, the parallel surge in Coalition forces in Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011, according to Department of Defense (DoD) data, resulted in no durable downturn in the volume of security incidents.[i]

Senior US and other Coalition leaders routinely identify lack of legitimacy of GIRoA (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) as the greatest danger to a successful mission outcome. The shortfall in legitimacy derives from obvious corruption, clientelism, dependence on warlords and unsavory power brokers, and a culture of impunity for human rights and financial crimes. It also follows failure to include traditional tribal and religious leaders. The government’s writ often does not extend far beyond Kabul. Even if the new President turns out to be as directed, motivated and “clean” as many hope, he will be able to surmount only a portion of these legacies. To some extent, he is bound for non-Pashtun support to his
Vice-President Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek leader, who by reputation was one of Afghanistan’s most violent warlords; and the delay in forming a Cabinet indicates that Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah has a separate agenda. In any event, transformative action would likely stir considerable opposition.

**Policy Vacuum**

However much International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leaders acknowledged GIRoA’s legitimacy gap, they seemed not to know what to do about it. Afghan scholar Thomas Barfield has described counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan as “a military operation without a political front.” Karl Eikenberry, former US Commander and later Ambassador to Kabul, criticized the surge strategy in 2009. He subsequently explained in *Foreign Affairs* that it was based on “spectacularly incorrect” premises, including: 1) that the COIN goal of protecting population was clear and would prove decisive; and 2) that foreign support and assistance would substantially increase GIRoA’s capacity and legitimacy. But rather than offer an alternative to the failed COIN effort, Eikenberry then generalizes that we should try to learn from our mistakes. Retired Army three-star general Daniel Bolger, who was active in Iraq and Afghanistan, acknowledges that we have “lost” in both, and says US generals failed repeatedly to reconsider basic assumptions, and “failed to question our flawed understanding of our foe or ourselves.” Then, however, he punts: far from suggesting a way to proceed in Afghanistan, he volunteers that younger officers will in the future “figure out” how to fight such wars.

Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense during 2006-2011, recounts a strategic dead-end. He reports that President Obama lost confidence in Coalition war strategy during General McChrystal’s tenure as ISAF Commander in 2010, and again during General Petraeus’s tenure in 2011. Gates adds that Obama asked him in January 2011 to develop a strategy to “work around” President Karzai in Afghanistan and General Kayani in Pakistan, but he leaves the impression that no such a strategy was ever provided. Succeeding Commanders Allen, Dunford and Campbell have been occupied with transition of control to the ANSF (Afghan National Security Force) and winding down the US involvement. Rather than seek new understanding of Afghanistan’s complexities, their Commands have been marked by drawing back from engagement with Ministries and others ISAF staff label as “non-priority.”

What has seldom wavered, from the Bonn Conference of December 2001 through plans for disengagement at the end of 2014, is the diplomatic- and donor-agency-driven commitment to the vision of Afghanistan as a democratic, pluralistic state where the central government’s credibility is felt even in distant provinces. This is the way the 2004 Afghan Constitution is written, it is the gist of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) for donor conditionality, and it is even in the language of military planning documents. However, such observers as Barfield and former Ambassador and Special Envoy Peter Tomsen have sharply questioned this view; and Henry Kissinger has similarly described nation-building in Afghanistan as “inherently implausible.” The highly regarded Report on the Wilton Park Conference (2010) offered:

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Other [participants] noted that success does not necessarily lie in Western notions of what a state should look like. The current predatory behaviour of many people within the [Afghan] state apparatus suggests that the international community should be looking to all forms of political governance in the country, including structures which do not conform to Western expectations.

But without a path to achieve such centralized credibility, US and Coalition efforts have focused instead...
on development, including on institutional capacity building, and on military operations and training. A shortfall of political legitimacy, in contrast, can be addressed only by demanding change, that is, by confronting Kabul on reform and realignment of domestic power, and by energizing groups or forces heretofore dormant. This means reducing the President’s power to appoint provincial and district officials, while increasing the role of provincial and district councils; weakening warlords residual powers, while energizing moderate elements among traditional tribal leadership; and, in a country with an Islamist insurgency, finding ways to reinforce religious moderates. But we typically refrain from such hardball diplomacy – and have instead posited that institution-building, or foreign assistance more generally, will itself create legitimacy. [viii] Such Coalition premises reflect strategic confusion.

If the Ghani-Abdullah administration is able to boost the central government’s acceptance among Afghans, it will be good news indeed; but the US and Coalition should no longer stake the outcome of the mission on having that happen. GIRoA’s growing national visibility in the decade after 2001, far from bringing stability to other regions of the country, did much to re-energize the rural and Pashtun insurgencies, including of the Taliban. Peaceful periods in Afghan history, for example from 1929 into the late 1970s, saw weak central governments that left effective autonomy to the regions. In contrast, both the modernizing Amanullah government of the decade before 1929 and the various Communist governments after 1978 failed, and provoked harsh counter-movements. The presumption should be that GIRoA must first enhance its credibility as a provider of security, dispute resolution and non-corrupt administration, and only then seek to extend its authority.

Some Recent History

The US needs to think like a superpower, rather than like a hired army on the verge of withdrawal. Much of what might have been accomplished during the past quarter-century did not require ground troops; and the fact that forces are being withdrawn does not cause US interests in Afghanistan to vanish. A superpower ought to be in a position to influence outcomes, to shift international financial support, and to leverage credibility in international fora.

Former Ambassador and Special Envoy Peter Tomsen argues that the US has enabled the wrong Afghan leaders and groups ever since the Soviet departure in 1989.[ix] During the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s, the CIA used the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as a conduit for supplying the Afghan Mujahideen. Following the Soviet exit, the US, through the CIA, essentially outsourced its Afghan policy to the ISI. The ISI was (and largely remains) under direction of hardline jihadists, and has consistently provided resources to strongly Islamist leaders and factions in Afghanistan. It was not a necessary consequence of US support for the earlier anti-Soviet war that US resources during the 1990s would be pitted against moderate and less sectarian Afghan groups. Journalist Charlotta Gall reports, for example, that “the vast majority of mujahideen were moderate and did not support terrorism.”[x]

An Afghan civil war raged from 1992 until the Taliban, to whom the ISI had shifted support, acceded to power in Kabul in 1996. The ISI initially supported demagogue Gulbuddin Heckmatyar and consistently opposed more moderate alternatives, including prominently the Tajik Ahmad Shah Masood in the North and independent-minded Pashtun leaders including Abdul Haq, who sought to organize tribes through traditional Jirga (tribal council) settings. As a result, such leaders received only droplets of financial support from the US through the civil war and the period of Taliban rule to 2001. The civil war itself undermined traditional tribal leadership to the advantage of the sort of warlords who rise in power vacuums.

Western interests were damaged early. Tomsen cabled to Washington as early as 1991 that if Pakistan allies Heckmatyar or Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf were to reach Kabul, then Arab terrorist organizations would
relocate their bases to Afghanistan, from which they might “stoke Islamic radicalism” in central Asia and the Middle East. The civil war era government, headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani and seeking allies -- and acting with the approval of the ISI -- admitted Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda following their expulsion from the Sudan in 1996. In predictable sequels, Al Qaeda and the Taliban assassinated Masood and Haq as the most viable threats to their power in 2001.

Afghan governance frameworks, and US selection of allies, have improved only slightly since 2001. At the Bonn Conference that December, Hamid Karzai, understood to be a moderate Pashtun, was anointed as leader by US diplomats, with the intention that he would lead a state-building effort. But King Zahir Shah, who had been in exile in Italy since the 1970s and was a natural unifying figure for Afghans exhausted from decades of Communist and Islamist governors –was given a few minutes on the podium, then shown the exit. The US Defense Department, working at some cross-purpose to the State Department -- not to mention cross purpose to President George W. Bush’s call in April 2002 for a new “Marshall Plan” -- then undermined Karzai’s position by advancing massive resources on various warlords during 2002 and 2003, among them Ismael Khan, Mohammed Fahim, Dostum, and Gul Agha Sherzai. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz argued that DoD’s warlord-centered policy recognized Afghanistan’s natural region-by-region autonomy.

Unfortunately, the DoD-led American policy undermined both centralized state-building and recovery of regional stability. Much of the Taliban’s original appeal lay in the alternative they offered to the warlord chaos and depredations of the civil war period. But as Karzai was frequently deserted by US backers, he turned to many of the same warlords, his erstwhile opponents, for support at least a modus vivendi. The US embrace of warlords in the years after 2001 neglected, and further weakened, potential networks of traditional tribal leaders and village elders -- which might otherwise have become moderate and influential allies of the new Karzai government. In consequence of these ill-advised moves, the Taliban were on the way to recovery by 2006.

Karzai’s role shifted from potential reformer to de facto power-broker-in-chief, from strategic nation-builder to tactical deal-maker. He maintained enough authority to be able to balance interests of warlords, tribal leaders, his own political appointees, and legislators. While he was keen to protect his warlord base, he also wanted to be able to bring pressure against the same people; for example, the Amnesty Law, passed in 2007 and gazetted in 2010, protects those who might be accused of past crimes, but without shutting the door to all legal redress. Karzai’s transformation was a large setback. The US sought course correction with a fairly open effort to defeat Karzai in the 2009 presidential election. Karzai, who by then had become vocally anti-American, doubled down on his working alliance with various regional power-brokers, and was re-elected with the help of a massively corrupt vote count. But while the international community’s modernizing agenda was undermined, GIRoA has neither shown interest in boosting traditional tribal and religious leadership, nor been willing to loosen control over budget or appointment power in provinces and districts. (Foreign assistance agencies reinforced GIRoA’s centralizing effort with their preference for administration through Kabul.) The base of support for the ISAF effort, and for GIRoA, has palpably narrowed.

Where to Go from Here

Perhaps the most basic rule of war strategy is to expand the breadth of one’s support, to boost allies, and to discourage uncommitted forces from joining the enemy. The US has done nearly the opposite since 2001 – undermining host country allies, even turning them against us, and ignoring potential new allies.

It is late, but perhaps not too late. The US and Coalition allies have a long-term interest in the stability of Afghanistan: a restoration of Taliban control might make the country again a haven for jihadist activity;
and Taliban advances will likely weaken GIRoA, and strengthen regional warlords. A return to warlord rule would mean domestic interference and influence-seeking from most regional neighbors. Whatever Afghanistan’s internal dynamics, the US and Coalition allies should also undertake more persistent efforts to involve foreign powers– most of which have ethnic or religious minorities mirroring those in Afghanistan -- in finding a regional balance that will endure.[xvi]

Emphasis on military support and development aid efforts inside Afghanistan reflect the weight of defense and foreign assistance bureaucracies in Washington and other Coalition capitals; but they have thus far had limited strategic results. The only way forward for Afghanistan’s domestic troubles is to build the political front long neglected, in order to put ourselves on the side of and to nurture forces for moderation and stability. The Coalition’s course should be to use influence on an array of issues to increase GIRoA’s legitimacy in some areas and to reduce its presence in others. Here are some specifics, based in part on meetings with GIRoA officials during 2013 and 2014.

**Tribal Engagement.** Senior people at the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs (MBTA) repeated a theme in a variety of ways: tribal leadership can play a crucial role in creating social adhesion, and thereby in undermining insurgent appeal. They told us that insurgents (Taliban, Haqani Network, etc.) cannot gain a foothold where tribal networks and loyalties are strong. Where decisions are made by tribal shuras (consultative councils), “extremists would not be part of the culture.” More expansively, we were told that tribal jirgas – which bring together leaders of smaller groups on a district, provincial, or even regional basis, in order to reach consensus – can help us to achieve broader goals. These might include: bringing the Taliban into peaceful processes; enhancing border security; and even discouraging consumption and production of poppies.

Westerners tend to think of tribal structures as a barrier to the kind of modernizing, open societies they wish to encourage. But a different, and often superior, strategy is to build on a foundation of tribal leadership, with its built-in legitimacy, and then to absorb tribal leaders and customary law into newer administrative and legal structures. African legal scholar Charles Mwalimu argues that this absorption strategy has worked to advance both constitutionalism and human rights protection in a number of countries in Sub-Sahara Africa – and has certainly been more effective than approaches that sought to discard such traditional structures.[xvii]

We heard repeatedly that the Coalition “was not dealing with the real leaders of Afghanistan” – that is, for its strategic engagement, the Coalition has largely confined itself to dealing with officials in Kabul, many of whom had little standing among Afghans, while neglecting tribal and religious leaders. (In this, we were warned, the US has replayed the Russians’ error from the 1980s.) Further, the practice of seeking warlords’ backing directly rather than dealing through tribal elders was a serious mistake. The pattern changed to some extent during 2010-2011 when Commanding General McChrystal sought broader engagement, but such discussions mostly ended not long after his departure. Officials at the Human Rights Commission told us that “real” tribal leaders are respected, and are a key to exercising soft power. President Karzai, they told us, often avoided dealing with tribal leaders because they had the potential to break up his patronage network – and certainly not because he was a “modernizer.” On the other hand, Karzai did frequently deal with his preferred tribal leaders, and to the point of circumventing the Ministry of Interior and other GIRoA structures.

Unlike the situation elsewhere, for example in Iraq, where a few tribal leaders sit atop of large hierarchies, traditional authority in Afghanistan is scattered among almost innumerable tribal and clan groupings. To have a strategic impact – to become part of a political front – they have to be brought together. Going forward, we should look for ways to encourage tribal jirgas -- perhaps with advances to MBTA from military or diplomatic budgets -- and we should encourage such government departments as the
Independent Directorate of Local Governments (IDLG) and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to engage the MBTA – as a conduit to tribal leadership -- in their sub-national framework initiatives.

Engaging Religious Leadership. For its optics, engagement with Afghan religious leadership might be sensitive, as Islam has come to be associated in Western minds with extremism, and many younger mullahs have offered support to insurgent groups. Indeed, we heard a credible account of a past US Ambassador to Kabul who told the Minister of Hajj and Islamic Affairs (MHIA). “If I work with you, they [in Washington] will put me in handcuffs.”

That premise is wrongheaded, to say the least. Mullahs have a natural leadership role in an Islamic society, and they, more than anyone else, are in a position to affect views and practices on human rights, the status of women, the role of education, the practice of Islam, and -- especially -- the doctrinal credibility of Islamist insurgents. Outgoing MHIA leadership was especially interested in these matters; indeed, they expressed much dismay at what they considered the frequent uninformed practice of Islam in Afghanistan. One point of MHIA influence is in overseeing training of mullahs, including choice of learning materials and selection of religious teachers. A source of leverage could be payment of stipends to cooperative mullahs; this practice is frequent in other Moslem countries, including in the Levant; in Saudi Arabia, a carrot-and-stick approach helped to restore order after spectacular extremist attacks a decade ago. For example, at $60 dollars/ month for 17,000 mullahs, $1 million/ month (a drop in the bucket against a war budget) might buy a lot of influence.

MHIA could have been a natural ally for the US and the Coalition, one with the potential to deliver a great deal of soft power. But – again, except for some contacts during McChrystal’s tenure – it has been neglected, and below the Western radar. With the new Ghani-Abdullah Administration, change is underway in leadership at MHIA, as in most Ministries. Enough is at stake that the US and allies should not leave this succession to chance, and should look for active engagement with the next leadership.

Engage the Human Rights Commission. While bringing traditional leadership into governance is critical, we should also look for ways to improve the legitimacy of the centralized structure in Kabul. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) was established in 2002 pursuant to the 2001 Bonn Conference, and is outlined in Article 58 of the Afghan Constitution. The opinion of many AIHRC officials is that President Karzai, through his appointments, sought to weaken the Commission. He certainly had reason to do so, as AIHRC has investigated war crimes and lesser rights violations from the 1990s, often including those committed by the warlords who came to comprise Karzai’s base of support. With assistance from foreign human rights NGOs, the Commission, probably in 2012, completed – but has not released -- an 800 page War Crimes Mapping Report. In part because of the political sensitivity of this investigation, and concern that Afghan political counterparts might be undermined, or threatened, the US State Department has stayed clear of meetings at policy levels of AIHRC.

Once again, US policy has been misdirected, as AIHRC could offer crucial support toward meeting Coalition objectives. The post-2001 role of many civil war participants, often accused of serious rights violations from the 1990s, has been a large barrier to establishing GIRoA’s legitimacy. In our discussions, AIHRC officials indicated that they would advise that the Afghan government is now too weak to release the Mapping Report, or to introduce any criminal proceedings based on the investigation. Were GIRoA to take such action, they told me, those named in the Report might retaliate with extensive violence, which would have the potential to push Afghanistan back into civil war.

But what AIHRC should be able to do is vet human rights records of candidates for political and administrative positions. AIHRC officials told us that “a credible government is a government without
warlords.” President Karzai did not wish such second-guessing of his choices for provincial or district governors, or for Ministerial positions. Neglect of closer collaboration with AIHRC has been a large gap in the Coalition’s years-long anti-corruption initiative. If GIRoA (with Coalition encouragement) could screen out even some of those whose credibility is heavily compromised, we could begin to undermine the post-2001 Afghan culture of immunity for human rights and financial crimes. It could be much more effective than allowing such people into official positions, then looking for case-by-case evidence of wrong-doing.

A couple of high-profile occasions are illuminating. AIHRC did not vet Presidential candidates for the 2014 election; in consequence, of the top five, one was Qayum Karzai, President Karzai’s half-brother, and two were warlords understand Karzai’s political allies, one of whom, Sayyaf, has been accused of large-scale war crimes. The warlords apparently had in mind to gain some bargaining leverage in the formation of a post-Karzai cabinet. A more active role by the Commission could have made for a higher-quality Presidential field – and it might have kept Dostum off the winning ticket. (The other two of the leaders, Ghani and Abdullah, presumably would have been vetted fairly easily.) In another incident, Karzai overcame objections from the Coalition to release 65 insurgent detainees in early 2014. AIHRC officials told us that, had they been invited into the process, they had sufficient information on insurgents’ human rights violations to have set up a further obstacle to their release.

Sub-National Governance. Afghanistan historically has been a land of different languages, geographic separations, and difficult travel. While GIRoA should find ways both to increase its credibility among Afghans, and to find subnational and tribal allies, it does not need to bring all groups and factions into a national governmental structure; indeed, such an inclusive Afghan structure has never existed. But governance can continue outside of the formal structure of GIRoA. The best the Coalition should hope for, going forward, is that armed conflicts will be low-grade and localized. A goal should be to induce some insurgents to pursue their objectives through political channels. Successful innovation in sub-national governance measures could contribute to answering the highest strategic question: how to shift some competition with insurgent groups from the military to the political arena – even in the face of ongoing inability of GIRoA and insurgent leaders seriously to negotiate.

Insurgents who seek to influence local events have little reason to compete for a voice in subnational councils as they now exist, because their power is so limited. Provinces and districts are blocked by Article 42 of the Afghan Constitution from raising their own revenue, which must instead come from Kabul. Currently, all governors are appointed by the President – which makes uncertain their responsiveness to provincial concerns. It would be consistent with the Constitution to have governors selected by elected provincial and district councils. We could insist on a larger role for provinces and districts in spending choices as a condition for ongoing external budget support. And we should look for a way for provinces, and perhaps for districts, to raise revenue, if necessary through legal changes.

Building sub-national governance structures with real powers has the potential to degrade the Taliban’s military wing. Barfield, with co-author Nojumi, merits quoting again:

While non-Pashtuns are particularly opposed to granting Taliban a role in the national government, they have few objections to their serving in local positions if they are popu-lar there. Those who come to hold such positions would have far less incentive to remain loyal to the Pakistan-based Taliban leadership, particularly its goal of seizing power nationwide, because it would conflict with their own local interests. Similarly, the
Coalition leadership has not yet grasped this nettle. For example, the Tokyo Framework, which sets conditions for continuation of foreign non-military assistance to Afghanistan, calls for “de-concentration” of power, rather than for “de-centralization.” The former provides for some sharing of decision-making with Kabul, but offers little push for subnational autonomy. While it apparently reflected the wishes of some around President Karzai, it was also favored among donor agencies used to dealing with centralized administration. As more than one Afghan has explained to us, IDLG creates the appearance of decentralization, while preventing it from actually happening. More rudely, IDLG has been called Karzai’s coordination post for countrywide patronage. The institutional deference that many in the international community have shown to IDLG suggests strategic confusion.

Some reporting suggests that President Ghani seeks a more substantial role for subnational governance. On an optimistic scenario, such an initiative could over time weaken the Taliban and other insurgents.

**Conclusion: The New Administration**

Despite the drawdown of foreign troops, the strategic dynamics of the conflict have changed little – although the Taliban’s position on the ground appears to be improving. And no matter what the Coalition does, or how effective the new GIRoA Administration becomes, we should not expect a rapid change in the military or political balance. The key to stabilizing Afghanistan over the next few years lies in the political dimension – and this paper walks through four elements of what might become a political front. All of them push against what President Karzai’s priorities were – or what they became after his remake as power-broker-in-chief.

The Ghani-Abdullah government may see things differently. They are not beholden – or are much less so – to Karzai’s power-broker network. Neither campaigned for President as a de-centralizer, but they may move in this direction now, particularly as international interest in and material support for Afghanistan slacken – and as the limits of GIRoA’s writ become clearer. At the same time, they may look for ways to strengthen moderate tribal and religious leaders. Similarly, neither said much about the Human Rights Commission, but both might now show more interest in laying building blocks for a more responsive and legitimate government. Should the new Administration turn in these directions, they will surely face opposition from domestic factions dependent of GIRoA’s status-quo. Indeed, scuttlebutt has it that Karzai himself now serves as a gathering point for recalcitrant factions. The role of the US and the Coalition must be to use statecraft, including aggressive diplomacy, to help to overcome such opposition. The US might even move away from a decades-long pattern of undermining moderates and shrinking the domestic coalition.

**End Notes**


[ii] On January 1, 2015, NATO’s ISAF mission was succeeded by the Advisory Resolute Support Mission.


[xvii] Barfield and Nojumi (2010); pp. 9-10.
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