THAT'S DEBATABLE

AFGHAN DILEMMAS: DEFINING COMMITMENTS

BARNETT R. RUBIN

The war in Afghanistan is not going well for U.S. and NATO forces. A proposal by U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Lynch is critiqued by Afghanistan expert Barnett R. Rubin.

Thomas Lynch has done a service by stating forthrightly that the United States is currently headed for “strategic failure” in Afghanistan, and by focusing attention on the still-undefined long-term U.S. strategic objective there. He rightly criticizes analyses that focus on tactical military victories, reminding us that the main determinants of success or failure will be political. He also offers a welcome corrective to the superficial Transatlantic blame-game going on lately when he asserts that neither insufficient NATO troops nor imposed national operational constraints on troop missions are the principal reasons for current problems.

Lynch accurately identifies, too, the failure of U.S. policy to address two major sources of instability: Afghanistan’s inability to sustain national security forces adequate to the current threat environment; and a regional environment driven principally by a Pakistani military doctrine determined by its estimate of the threat from India, and that reads its strategic interests as precluding a full-scale offensive against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Lynch rightly proposes that international actors, particularly the United States, guarantee Afghanistan’s security, ensure that Afghanistan can finance its own security forces, and undertake diplomacy to address the broader sources of instability in the region.

However, the primary means Lynch proposes to accomplish these objectives—a binding, long-term, bilateral defense treaty between the United States and Afghanistan—would be self-defeating. The reason is one that Lynch himself cites as afflicting current policy: the failure to take into account the political effects of military deployments. Lynch argues that instability in the region results from the lack of a credible U.S. commitment to stay. But a public commitment (or a private determination) to maintain U.S. military bases in a Muslim country on the Asian land mass will also generate—indeed, has already generated—resistance from Afghans, their neighbors (mainly Iran and Pakistan), and Asian powers such as Russia, China and India. Such a commitment will also invariably affect their assessments of U.S. goals. Long-term unilateral dependence on the United States will also undermine the legitimacy of any Afghan government, and no amount of money or number of foreign troops will sustain an Afghan government’s security forces under such circumstances.

The United States does need to make a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, but that commitment can succeed only if it is made to an independent national government embedded within a multilateral framework that gives its neighbors and other powers a stake in its stability. Absent those conditions, no clever tactical innovations, great speeches or defense treaties will make a difference.

THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVE

The belief that the United States will not remain in Afghanistan for the duration is certainly one factor that Afghans and others in the region take into account in making political decisions. But so is the belief that the United States has goals in the region other than peace and stability in Afghanistan. It is critical that U.S. policymakers understand the reason for this belief, for if they do not it will prove impossible to define coherently and achieve U.S. goals in Afghanistan. As in the United States, hardliners abroad argue that capabilities are more reliable indicators of threat than intentions, and they often win the day in national security planning. It is therefore unwise to base U.S. strategy on the assumption that everyone else thinks our intentions are benign. Let us consider how others see regional dynamics and their stakes.

Before 1989, the war in Afghanistan was entangled with the Cold War: Pakistan joined the U.S.-led anti-Soviet alliance in order to arm itself against India. Afghanistan, which originally contested the legitimacy of Pakistan's creation and has never explicitly recognized the border between the two countries, followed India into a form of non-alignment tilted toward its northern neighbor. The United States saw the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s as part of its containment (and then rollback) strategy; Pakistan saw it as a way to gain strategic depth against India.

As long as the Soviet Union had troops in Afghanistan, Iran supported Shi'a resistance fighters there, but after the Red Army withdrew Iran counseled its allies to move closer to Moscow, for it feared the formation of a Sunni extremist (Wahhabi) Afghanistan backed by the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This fear explains why Iran sponsored the formation of the Northern Alliance, which was eventually aided also by India and Russia, while Pakistan instead supported first the Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and, later, the Taliban, with the help of the mainly Arab salafi jihadists we now know as al-Qaeda. In 1990, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States imposed sanctions against Pakistan's nuclear program. Though the United States had repeatedly warned Pakistan of the consequences of its program, Islamabad perceived U.S. sanctions as an act of abandonment and a signal of U.S. alignment with India, all this despite Pakistan's help in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, Iran and Russia saw the Taliban (like the previous U.S. policy tilt toward Saddam Hussein) as part of a U.S.-Pakistani-Saudi plan to encircle Iran. The strengthening of links between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and the consequent worsening of relations between the United States, on the one hand, and Pakistan and the Taliban, on the other, culminated in a temporary realignment after September 11. Despite some jockeying for relative advantage, Russia, Iran, India and the United States ultimately cooperated to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and to establish the new Afghan government. Not only did Iran cooperate with the United States, Russia actively helped it establish support bases in Central Asia. Pakistan was politically marginalized in the process.

Since then, however, old alignments have re-emerged thanks in part to missteps in U.S. policy. The Bush Administration responded to Iranian cooperation by placing Iran in the Axis of Evil and naming Pakistan its most important non-NATO U.S. ally. Northern Alliance figures close to Iran and Russia have been eased out of power. In May 2005, Afghanistan and the United States signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership, and, largely in response, in July 2005, the heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Russia, China and all the Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan) asked the United States to set a date for closing its bases in Central Asia. They have charged that the United States is exploiting cooperation against terrorism to project power into oil-rich Central Asia.

What does all this have to do with Afghanistan and the present U.S. quest to stabilize that country? Virtually everything, for the United States cannot achieve its policy goals in Afghanistan without understanding regional dynamics, and how Afghanistan has always fit within them.

When Ahmed Shah Durrani was chosen as Shah of the Afghans at a *jirga* in Kandahar in 1747, he led the Pashtun tribes first to conquer several territories that form part of today's Afghanistan and then, to plunder India in a series of raids. (His predecessor Mirwais Khan Hotaki had plundered Iran instead.) This immediate turn to conquest did not arise from some supposedly innate violent and xenophobic Afghan character but from the fact that the territory of Afghanistan did not produce enough wealth to finance a state. When the expansion of European imperial powers (Britain and Russia) into the region made external raiding impossible, Afghanistan went through a period of instability and war. The country stabilized in its current *de facto* borders (never accepted *de jure* by any Afghan government, including the Taliban), but only as a subsidized buffer state.

Bilateral agreements between Afghanistan and Britain formalized the subsidy, and a bilateral agreement between Britain and Russia formalized the country's status as a buffer state. The subsidy enabled the Amir to build army and police forces that gained and administered (incomplete) control of the territory. The agreement between Britain and Russia ensured that neither imperial power would use Afghanistan against the other. The subsidy provided the Afghan state with a domestic preponderance of resources, and the diplomatic agreement among regional powers ensured that none of them would use their resources to subvert the state.

The two necessary ingredients for the stability of a state within the borders of today's Afghanistan have not changed: international aid or subsidies provided to a legitimate Afghan state; and political consent by those capable of subverting that state (mostly neighbors and great powers) to political arrangements inside Afghanistan. Rapid economic growth that would provide a tax base for adequate security forces is, at best, a very long-term scenario. The cost of security depends on the threat environment: The more domestic legitimacy and the less international opposition to the Afghan state, the fewer subsidies it needs to maintain power.

What has changed is that, where once Russia and Britain dominated Afghanistan's regional environment, today the disputatious successors to the Raj—Pakistan and India—play major roles, as do Russia and other successor states to the USSR, an independent revolutionary Iran, the Arab kingdoms and emirates of the Persian Gulf, powers like the United States, China, NATO, the EU, the UN and international financial institutions to boot. Under such complicated circumstances, no international consensus on political arrangements in Afghanistan has emerged to replace the one that broke down in 1978–79, and the political and military mobilization of broad sectors of the Afghan population has meant that Kabul requires even more power to rule. That power has to be generated by some combination of coercion and legitimacy, and it follows that if regional diplomacy bolsters the legitimacy of the Afghan government, it will require fewer resources.

INSIDE AND OUT

With this background in mind, it is now possible to see why a U.S.-Afghanistan defense treaty will distort relations between the Afghan state and its own people, as well as harming relations between the Afghan state and its neighbors. It also suggests better ways to pursue U.S. goals.

Only two kinds of Afghans appear in Lynch's analysis: Taliban, "a bedrock partner" of al-Qaeda, and the Afghan government, which "covets a strategic partnership with America." In truth, Afghans corresponding to either of these stereotypes are rare. Those who join the insurgency are a more diverse group than one might think, and those who want a partnership with America are increasingly coming to the conclusion that America as it actually exists is quite different from the one with which they would like to ally.

The most common Afghan attitude toward foreign troops is like that of the restaurant customer who complains that not only is the food terrible, but the portions are too small. Lynch is right that Afghans think the portions are too small, but he forgets that they don't much like the food, even if it is the only food they can get right now. Afghans don't like their country being occupied by foreign soldiers any more than did their ancestors. However, after the experience of 1978–2001, many concluded that being occupied by the United States was the only alternative to being destroyed by their neighbors. At least the United States would improve their standard of living.

But that has not happened. The deterioration of security and the failure of the foreigners to improve the living standard of the poor majority of Afghans, especially in areas affected by insurgency, have decreased support for the international presence. Surveys provide evidence of this, as do anecdotes. Young men, largely from the most anti-Taliban group in Afghanistan, rioted against the foreign presence in Kabul in May 2006 after a brake failure on a U.S. vehicle led to a fatal traffic accident. Another incident also involved a brake failure. As the 16-year-old cousin of an Afghan who sometimes works with me in Kabul approached a U.S. checkpoint on his bicycle, the soldiers shouted for him to halt. This Afghan bicycle had no brakes, so the cousin started to drag his feet on the ground to slow the bike. This wasn't slow enough for the U.S. soldiers, who shot and killed the boy. The Americans then took the body and kept it for three days (a grave offense in Islam), while the family camped outside the base. After the body was finally returned, the village elders met and decided to join the Taliban to fight the Americans. They also told my Afghan colleague that as long as he worked for the government in Kabul, he could not return to the village. So this entire village has joined the Taliban, though it would be a stretch to characterize it as a "bedrock partner" of al-Qaeda.

The U.S. soldiers may have feared that the bicycle rider was a suicide bomber and obeyed both their rules of engagement and the international laws of war. Nonetheless, their act generated hatred and resistance. There have been many such incidents, each of which is amplified by rumor and propaganda. American soldiers are usually as humane as heavily armed young soldiers can be when their lives are threatened in alien surroundings. There is no way to eliminate such incidents, and most measures to reduce them involve greater risk for U.S. soldiers. This suggests that a political approach to the "Taliban" insurgency may require decreasing the U.S. and other foreign military presence rather than increasing it.

The international civilian presence also undermines the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Restaurants that serve alcohol or function as covers for brothels, neighborhoods blockaded for security, and the skyrocketing cost of living partly due to the cash spent by foreign residents are symbols of Afghan powerlessness no less than civilian casualties. These symbols, in turn, diminish the Afghan state's legitimacy through mechanisms often invisible to outsiders. As Afghan clergy increasingly preach that the foreign presence is an illegitimate occupation threatening Islam, some are reportedly refusing Muslim funeral rites to Afghan soldiers killed fighting the insurgency alongside the United States or NATO. Few things could be more damaging to morale and recruitment than that.

The Bush Administration, however, has managed to find another way to use the U.S. presence to undermine the Afghan National Army. It is now applying heavy pressure, including threats that Congress will cut off aid, to force the Afghan government not only to engage in opium poppy eradication in hostile areas, but also to use the Afghan National Army in support of such operations. Afghan defense officials believe that using the army for such operations will seriously damage the young force, while distracting it from its core security mission.

Of course, an ideal U.S. presence would not pressure the Afghan government to act against its own national interests. The current presence, however, does so not only in domestic policy but also in its relations to its neighbors, who know the history of geopolitical competition in the area, even if we do not.

Lynch claims that a unilateral, open-ended commitment to Afghanistan by the United States "is certain to generate some regional controversy, but its positive potential outcomes outweigh the risks from vocal but likely temporary Russian, Pakistani or Iranian unhappiness." He misidentifies the problem. The problem is not persuading others that American goodwill will not flag, it is making them see that American interests align with their own, which they often objectively do not. Therefore, just as most Afghans no longer credit the purity of American motives or the competence of American officials inside their country, regional actors do not and will not believe that the United States is committed to Afghanistan: They are far more inclined to believe instead that the United States will make Afghanistan committed to America.

The Shanghai Cooperation Statement of July 2005 illustrates this perception, as do Iranian actions. The closest the United States has come to Lynch's proposal is the aforementioned May 2005 Declaration of Strategic Partnership. Tehran responded by asking President Karzai to sign a declaration of strategic partnership with Iran that, among its provisions, committed Afghanistan not to permit its territory to be used for military or intelligence operations against Iran. The message was clear: Iran will accept Afghanistan's strategic partnership with the United States, but only if it is not directed against Iran.

President Karzai responded that he would like to sign such a declaration, but that his government was not in a position to prevent the United States from using its territory against Iran. The Iranians said that they knew that, but would like such a statement anyway, and that without such a declaration President Karzai would not be welcome in Tehran for the August 2005 inauguration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A phone call to President Karzai from a cabinet officer in Washington forbade the Afghan President from signing any such declaration or attending the inauguration. A few months later, in January 2006, another phone call forbade Karzai to travel to Tehran to sign economic agreements.

In early 2007, Washington reported that Iran had started to supply sophisticated arms to the Taliban. That summer, as calls for "regime change" and a preemptive attack on Iran's nuclear program escalated in Washington, Tehran made a formal declaration: If Iran were attacked by the United States, it would respond fully against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, regardless of its bilateral interests in those two countries. What this shows is that Iranian responses to threats posed by a larger and permanent U.S. presence in Afghanistan will be more than "vocal." Iran can respond asymmetrically—and potentially devastatingly—against the United States in Afghanistan. How Iran would respond to a U.S. commitment to a long-term military presence in Afghanistan depends on U.S. policy toward Iran, a point Lynch does not address.

The core issue with regard to Afghanistan, however, is not Iran but Pakistan. Lynch accurately diagnoses much of the situation but underestimates the difficulty of changing it. His analysis of Pakistan also leans too far in favor of military factors to the relative neglect of the critical political context.

Lynch is correct that Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan has had at least two tracks, and that the policy has mainly been determined by the Pakistani military's security concerns about India. Lynch calls these concerns "paranoid", as if they might be alleviated through the right combination of medication (more aid and training) and talk therapy (assurances from U.S. diplomats that the Indian elite attitudes toward Pakistan have undergone a sea change). Alas, the malady from which the Pakistani security establishment suffers is endemic worldwide, and it is not amenable to quick courses of treatment. Is it not "paranoid" to build a missile defense system in eastern Europe (that will probably not work) against non-existent Iranian missiles with non-existent nuclear warheads at the cost of relations with Russia? Is it more "paranoid" for Pakistan to be concerned about a nuclear-armed neighbor eight times its size, with which it has a serious territorial dispute and has fought three conventional wars?

The “cure” for the Pakistani military’s self-aggrandizing definition of national security is not U.S. assurances or “insistence” on an end to duplicity. (In a Council on Foreign Relations report, I once proposed that the Administration “should insist on the Pakistani government’s full cooperation in isolating and ending the neo-Taliban insurgency.” CFR President Richard Haass inquired in a marginal comment, “What if we insist and they still don’t do it?”) The Pakistan government will also not readily accept “mediation” of the Durand Line dispute because there is no such dispute, according to the government of Pakistan. There is just a domestic political problem inside Afghanistan that prevents the Afghan state from openly accepting a border it has implicitly recognized many times.

Lynch has correctly identified the problem, but the solution is not greater “commitment”, firmer “insistence” or any other form of interpersonal communication. The security complex in South Asia can only be transformed by political change, the centerpiece of which must be the democratization of Pakistan, to include civilian control of its national security strategy. The Pakistani military will not consent to a stable Afghanistan under U.S. hegemony because it fears that the United States will reduce military aid to Pakistan the moment it no longer needs Pakistan to address terrorism or instability in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military cannot agree to a definition of Pakistani national security that is not based on the Indian threat, because that threat, in addition to being founded on the reality of Indian capabilities, provides the rationale for the military’s domination of Pakistan’s state, society and economy.

Fortunately, many forces in Pakistan contest the military’s definition of national security, but these forces have been powerless over national security issues in the face of military dominance—and that goes even for elected prime ministers. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has worked against these forces by supporting the autocratic rule of Pervez Musharraf. The Administration hoped and believed that Pakistan under military rule would act as an effective proxy in the War on Terror, but it has not. By insisting that Pakistan’s poorly conceived and counterproductive counterterrorist operations be pursued more vigorously, the Administration has made things worse—as Lynch points out. U.S. policy has had the collateral effect of keeping the Pakistani military semi-autonomous under U.S. oversight rather than accountable to Pakistani civilian authorities. This assures exclusion from Pakistani national security policy of those most interested in changing it in ways that align with actual U.S. interests.

As Lynch and others have noted, a strategic approach to addressing the long-standing hostility between Afghanistan and Pakistan is essential to success in Afghanistan. Anything that reduces Indo-Pakistani tension and threat perceptions will help. The key, however, is to be found inside Pakistan. If Pakistan will not respect a border that Afghanistan does not recognize, Afghanistan cannot recognize a border for which Pakistan does not take responsibility. Improving relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan thus requires the political and administrative integration of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Pakistan. This is now possible: All the parties that form part of the new governing coalition in the Pakistani Parliament support such integration, as do the two parties that will form the government of the Northwest Frontier Province and that dominated the nominally non-party February elections in the Tribal Areas.

The Pakistani military and presidency have opposed such integration, however, though they have done so indirectly. They claim that it is impossible, or too difficult, or contrary to Pakistan’s constitution (though the latter proved easy to modify when it conflicted with the immediate interests of President Musharraf). They do this because they use the Tribal Areas as a staging ground for asymmetrical warfare, which forms part of the Pakistani military’s security doctrine. The problems posed by this doctrine can be addressed only by a civilian government, and only a civilian government seeking to extend Pakistani democracy to the Tribal Areas, rather than a military one that feigns implementation of the War on Terror, will ever truly overcome resistance there. That is exactly what the United States should want to happen, especially since that is where

the global headquarters of a revived al-Qaeda is now located.

FIVE ELEMENTS OF COMMITMENT

Lynch proposes that the United States solve the Afghan security puzzle by combining two approaches. The first approach is to compensate for Afghanistan's inability to finance and sustain adequate security forces by unilaterally guaranteeing Afghanistan's security through a treaty, and continuing to fund Afghan security forces at whatever level the threat environment requires, whether Afghanistan can afford them or not. The second approach is to reduce the threat level by a commitment so strong that all will conclude resistance is futile, and then to cure Pakistan's "paranoia" through talk therapy (diplomacy) and medication (train and equip the military). As I have suggested, unilateral policies based on an Afghan government dependent on the United States and the chimera of unchallengeable U.S. military hegemony will not work. But what will?

To answer that question we must decide not only what our goals are, but also what it will take to achieve them. We can never stabilize Afghanistan and then make a victorious exit without coming to some understanding with Afghanistan's neighbors. So the first thing we must do is show that we understand regional realities by engaging the neighbors on their genuine interests; otherwise they will continue to wage asymmetrical warfare against us until we get the message.

We should therefore launch regional consultations to develop a common understanding of the future of Afghanistan in the region with all neighbors, including Iran, Russia, China, India and the Persian Gulf countries. Both the UN and regional organizations offer forums to pursue these objectives. Afghanistan can no longer be an isolated buffer state, but it can serve as a connector of a wider region through trade, transit, energy transmission and labor migration as long as it is not a source of threats. Integrating Afghanistan as a focal point for regional cooperation, however, is not compatible with making it a base for U.S. power projection in the region. The long-term U.S. presence in Europe is enabled by the substantial overlap in membership between the security alliance (NATO) and the framework for economic and political cooperation (the European Union). Without a similar overlapping of security and economic frameworks in South Asia, a U.S. presence will be destabilizing, not stabilizing.

Second, we must crack the Pakistani nut. The absence of U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan (which was essential to our initial military success in 2001) and growing tensions with Russia and China in Central Asia give Pakistan monopoly control of U.S. access to landlocked Afghanistan. It follows that as long as the Pakistani military is calling the shots, Afghanistan will remain roiled no matter how many battles NATO forces win. To change this dynamic, the United States must relinquish, not strengthen, the privileged relationship between the United States and the Pakistani military. It must instead support civilian control over the government and the military alike, even by parties that oppose U.S. objectives openly (rather than covertly, like the military).

A Pakistani soldier in a foxhole in the North West Frontier Province. [credit: Warrick Page/Corbis]

Third, the United States must also invest far more in Afghanistan's economy and civilian institutions, especially those that are important for rule of law. This requires a far more effective set of policies than we have had so far. It also requires a reversal of much of the Bush

Administration's counter-narcotics policy. Strengthening the legitimacy of the Afghan government works best when pursued through a multilateral framework, not because multilateralism is always superior to unilateralism, but because regional realities in South Asia render unilateral efforts futile. The Afghan government formed at the UN Talks on Afghanistan in Bonn (where I was a member of the UN delegation) enjoyed far greater legitimacy than either the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq or its elected successors.

Fourth, as a component of strengthening civilian institutions, we should fully support efforts by the Afghan government to negotiate and reconcile with insurgents, making it clear that we are concerned about threats to international security, not weakening Islamic political forces for its own sake. Most of those fighting the Karzai government are not "bedrock partners" of al-Qaeda, though the resources provided by and through al-Qaeda and its partners make the insurgency far more deadly. They can be weaned away from al-Qaeda, but this must happen Afghan-style, and only Afghans can make the deals necessary to do that. We need to let them.

Fifth, external support for Afghan security forces and for civilian parts of the budget must be institutionalized. It would be preferable to make such support more multilateral and to devise a scenario for eventual self-sufficiency. Such a scenario would combine threat reduction, economic development and state building. At the very least, funding for Afghan security forces should be de-linked from Iraq and integrated into the regular U.S. defense budget: No country can build institutions on the basis of a foreign country's supplemental appropriations. A smaller but reliable commitment is better than a huge unpredictable one. Together with consultations on Afghanistan's role in the region's security, the United States should structure Afghan forces to act independently rather than as auxiliaries of the United States and NATO, so that they do not appear to threaten the region on behalf of external powers.

Lynch rightly refers to Clausewitz on the relationship of politics to war. He might also recall Sun Tzu's statement, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of one hundred battles." Who is the enemy? As I see it, the most serious threat to security in the region derives from al-Qaeda's transnational campaign against the integration of the Islamic world into the current international order. The way to defeat al-Qaeda is to deprive it of a base by strengthening legitimate governance throughout the territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan, while ending policies (such as the occupation of Iraq) that act as recruiting tools for the enemy.

But who are we? The United States is the most powerful state in the world, but its power has limits. We deceive ourselves if we expect others to respond to our exercise of power as a disinterested pursuit of "stability." We have neither the strength nor the knowledge to shock and awe all opposition in an environment we understand poorly. But we do have the capacity to define and mold common interests, and to build coalitions of the truly willing in defense of those interests.

© The American Interest LLC, 2006