

The stakes in Afghanistan are high. NATO's Comprehensive Strategic Political Military Plan and President Obama's strategy to disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat al Qaeda and prevent their return to Afghanistan have laid out a clear path of what we must do. Stability in Afghanistan is an imperative; if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban - or has insufficient capability to counter transnational terrorists - Afghanistan could again become a base for terrorism, with obvious implications for regional stability.

The situation in Afghanistan is serious; neither success nor failure can be taken for granted. Although considerable effort and sacrifice have resulted in some progress, many indicators suggest the overall situation is deteriorating. We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans - in both their government and the international community - that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents. Further, a perception that our resolve is uncertain makes Afghans reluctant to align with us against the insurgents.

Success is achievable, but it will not be attained simply by trying harder or "doubling down" on the previous strategy. Additional resources are required, but focusing on force or resource requirements misses the point entirely. The key take away from this assessment is the urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way that we think and operate.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) requires a new strategy that is credible to, and sustainable by, the Afghans. This new strategy must also be properly resourced and executed through an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency campaign that earns the support of the Afghan people and provides them with a secure environment.

To execute the strategy, we must grow and improve the effectiveness of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and elevate the importance of governance. We must also prioritize resources to those areas where the population is threatened, gain the initiative from the insurgency, and signal unwavering commitment to see it through to success. Finally, we must redefine the nature of the fight, clearly understand the impacts and importance of time, and change our operational culture.

Redefining the Fight

This is a different kind of fight. We must conduct classic counterinsurgency operations in an environment that is uniquely complex. Three regional insurgencies have intersected with a dynamic blend of local power struggles in a country damaged by 30 years of conflict. This makes for a situation that defies simple solutions or quick fixes. Success demands a comprehensive counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.

Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective

must be the population. In the struggle to gain the support of the people, every action we take must enable this effort. The population also represents a powerful actor that can and must be leveraged in this complex system. Gaining their support will require a better understanding of the people's choices and needs. However, progress is hindered by the dual threat of a resilient insurgency and a crisis of confidence in the government and the international coalition. To win their support, we must protect the people from both of these threats.

Many describe the conflict in Afghanistan as a war of ideas, which I believe to be true. However, this is a 'deeds-based' information environment where perceptions derive from actions, such as how we interact with the population and how quickly things improve. The key to changing perceptions lies in changing the underlying truths. We must never confuse the situation as it stands with the one we desire, lest we risk our credibility.

The Criticality of Time

The impact of time on our effort in Afghanistan has been underappreciated and we require a new way of thinking about it.

First, the fight is not an annual cyclical campaign of kinetics driven by an insurgent "fighting season." Rather, it is a year-round struggle, often conducted with little apparent violence, to win the support of the people. Protecting the population from insurgent coercion and intimidation demands a persistent presence and focus that cannot be interrupted without risking serious setback.

Second, and more importantly, we face both a short and long-term fight. The long-term fight will require patience and commitment, but I believe the short-term fight will be decisive. Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) - while Afghan security capacity matures - risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible.

Change the Operational Culture

As formidable as the threat may be, we make the problem harder. ISAF is a conventional force that is poorly configured for COIN, inexperienced in local languages and culture, and struggling with challenges inherent to coalition warfare. These intrinsic disadvantages are exacerbated by our current operational culture and how we operate.

Pre-occupied with protection of our own forces, we have operated in a manner that distances us - physically and psychologically - from the people we seek to protect. In addition, we run the risk of strategic defeat by pursuing tactical wins that cause civilian casualties or unnecessary collateral damage. The insurgents cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves.

Accomplishing the mission demands a renewed emphasis on the basics through a dramatic change in how we operate, with specific focus in two principle areas:

1. Change the operational culture to connect with the people. I believe we must interact more

closely with the population and focus on operations that bring stability, while shielding them from insurgent violence, corruption, and coercion.

2. Improve unity of effort and command. We must significantly modify organizational structures to achieve better unity of effort. We will continue to realign relationships to improve coordination within ISAF and the international community.

The New Strategy: Focus on the Population

Getting these basics right is necessary for success, but it is not enough. To accomplish the mission and defeat the insurgency we also require a properly resourced strategy built on four main pillars:

1. Improve effectiveness through greater partnering with ANSF. We will increase the size and accelerate the growth of the ANSF, with a radically improved partnership at every level, to improve effectiveness and prepare them to take the lead in security operations.
2. Prioritize responsive and accountable governance. We must assist in improving governance at all levels through both formal and traditional mechanisms.
3. Gain the initiative. Our first imperative, in a series of operational stages, is to gain the initiative and reverse the insurgency's momentum.
4. Focus Resources. We will prioritize available resources to those critical areas where vulnerable populations are most threatened.

These concepts are not new. However, implemented aggressively, they will be revolutionary to our effectiveness. We must do things dramatically differently - even uncomfortably differently - to change how we operate, and also how we think. Our every action must reflect this change of mindset: how we traverse the country, how we use force, and how we partner with the Afghans. Conventional wisdom is not sacred; security may not come from the barrel of a gun. Better force protection may be counterintuitive; it might come from less armour and less distance from the population.

The Basis of Assessment: Analysis and Experience

My conclusions were informed through a rigorous multi-disciplinary assessment by a team of accomplished military personnel and civilians and my personal experience and core beliefs. Central to my analysis is a belief that we must respect the complexities of the operational environment and design our strategic approach accordingly. As we analyzed the situation, I became increasingly convinced of several themes: that the objective is the will of the people, our conventional warfare culture is part of the problem, the Afghans must ultimately defeat the insurgency, we cannot succeed without significantly improved unity of effort, and finally, that protecting the people means shielding them from all threats.

A Strategy for Success: Balancing Resources and Risk

Our campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today. Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged a growing insurgency - historically a recipe for failure in COIN. Success will require a discrete "jump" to gain the initiative, demonstrate progress in the short term, and secure long-term support.

Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it. Resourcing communicates commitment, but we must also balance force levels to enable effective ANSF partnering and provide population security, while avoiding perceptions of coalition dominance. Ideally, the ANSF must lead this fight, but they will not have enough capability in the near-term given the insurgency's growth rate. In the interim, coalition forces must provide a bridge capability to protect critical segments of the population. The status quo will lead to failure if we wait for the ANSF to grow.

The new strategy will improve effectiveness through better application of existing assets, but it also requires additional resources. Broadly speaking, we require more civilian and military resources, more ANSF, and more ISR and other enablers. At the same time, we will find offsets as we reprogram other assets and improve efficiency. Overall, JSAF requires an increase in the total coalition force capability and end-strength. This 'properly resourced' requirement will define the minimum force levels to accomplish the mission with an acceptable level of risk.

Unique Moment in Time

This is an important - and likely decisive - period of this war. Afghans are frustrated and weary after eight years without evidence of the progress they anticipated. Patience is understandably short, both in Afghanistan and in our own countries. Time matters; we must act now to reverse the negative trends and demonstrate progress.

I do not underestimate the enormous challenges in executing this new strategy; however, we have a key advantage: the majority of Afghans do not want a return of the Taliban. During consultations with Afghan Defense Minister Wardak, I found some of his writings insightful:

"Victory is within our grasp, provided that we recommit ourselves based on lessons learned and provided that we fulfil the requirements needed to make success inevitable ... I reject the myth advanced in the media that Afghanistan is a 'graveyard of empires' and that the U.S. and NATO effort is destined to fail. Afghans have never seen you as occupiers, even though this has been the major focus of the enemy's propaganda campaign. Unlike the Russians, who imposed a government with an alien ideology, you enabled us to write a democratic constitution and choose our own government. Unlike the Russians, who destroyed our country, you came to rebuild."

Given that this conflict and country are his to win - not mine - Minister Wardak's assessment was part of my calculus. While the situation is serious, success is still achievable. This starts with redefining both the fight itself and what we need for the fight. It is then sustained through a fundamentally new way of doing business. Finally, it will be realized when our new operational culture connects with the powerful will of the Afghan people.

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